ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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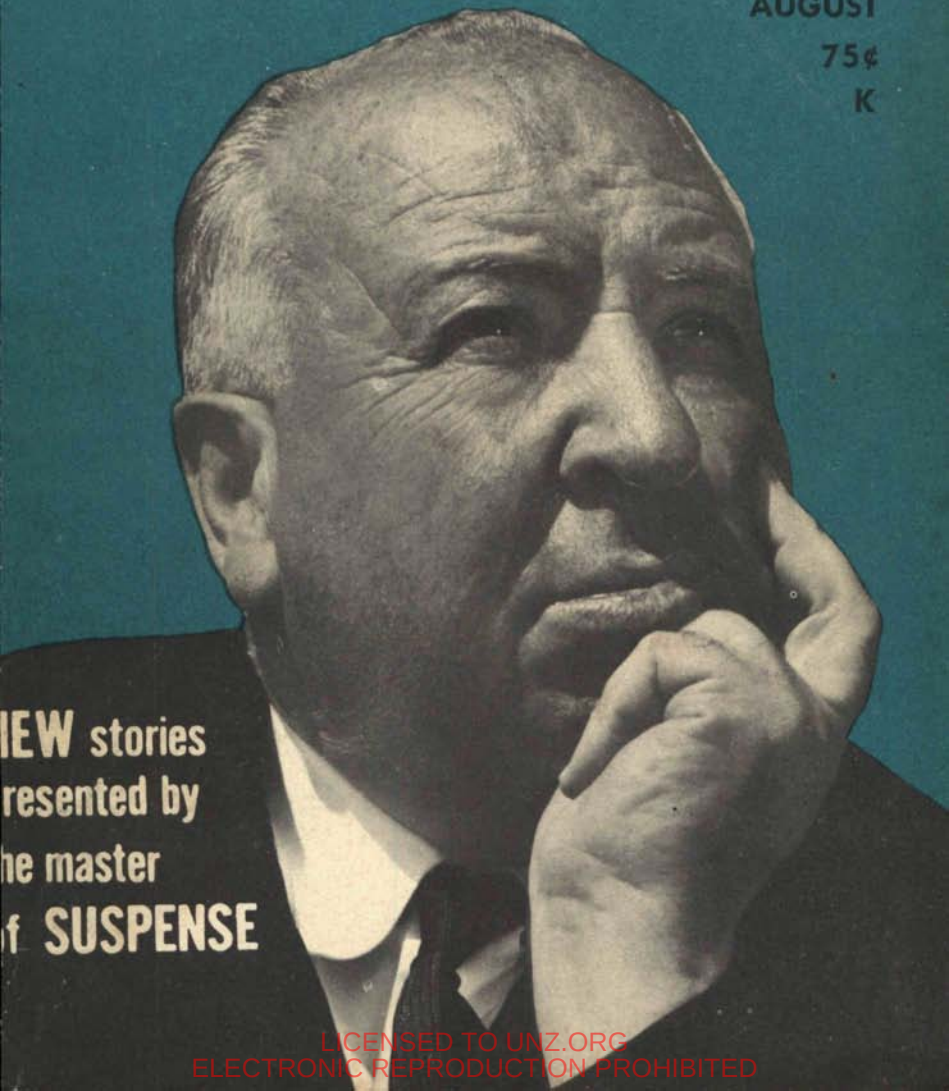

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August 1972

Dear Reader:

I blush this month, not from overexposure to the sun's rays, but because of the wealth of outstanding new mystery and suspense that it is my pleasure to present. It should be a comfortable feeling to know that you have arrived —at the prime depot for the bizarre in literature. How comfortable you will feel subsequently cannot be fully calculated, but I trust it will have something to do with satisfaction.

From Allen K. Lang's *Hold a Mirror to Murder,* to Robert Colby's novelette of amateur detection titled *Another Way Out,* there is a host of friendly sorts, from ghost hunter to ax murderer, and then some.

So enjoy this potpourri of macabre diversions, from which not even the heat of summer can take the chill from these leaves of paper and ink.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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VOLUME 17, NO. 8 AUGUST 1972

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S
mystery magazine

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Wherein one ponders if the rules of the revenant are as strict as the rules of physics—or as encompassing as an old man's whimsy.

Hold a Mirror to MURDER

CHEWING ON a pretzel-stick as big around as his arm, James O'Leary Tulson sat on the shelf of his mother's shopping cart, his plump legs sticking out the back. Grocery shopping was his favorite chore. "Dat!" he told his mother, pointing the frayed pretzel at a handsome stack of ammonia bottles. "Da!" he said to a pyramid of soft-drink cans. "Ho!" he shouted, blinking at a flash of light, and in the excitement dropping his pretzel.

Blue Tulson knelt to pick up the gnawed pretzel, glancing back as

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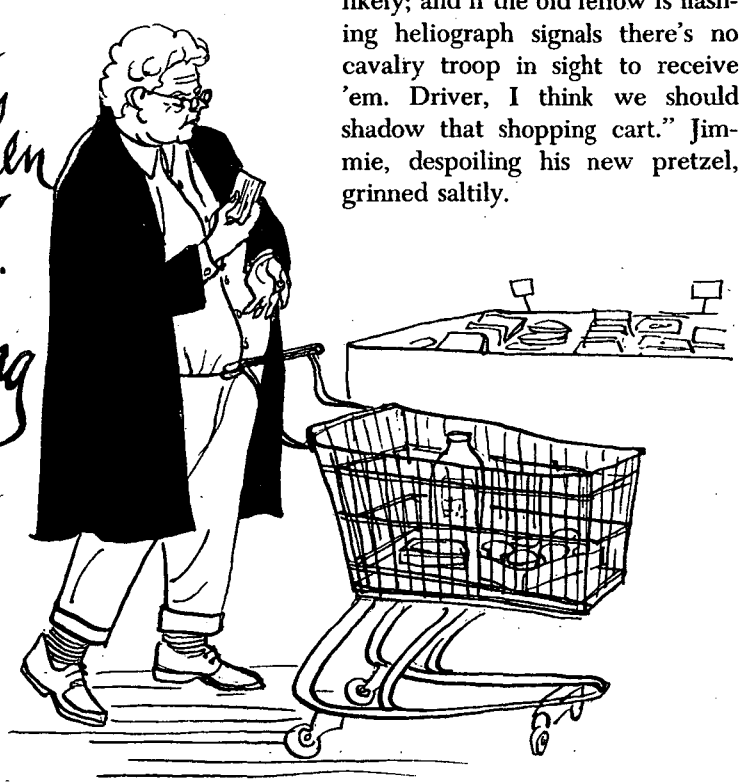
she did so to see what it was that had caught her little boy's eye. There it was again: a flicker of light at the end of the aisle. It came from the direction of the plump, white-haired fellow in the black raincoat who was slowly pushing a shopping cart along with his belly. He had a mirror in one hand, one of those rectangular mirrors little girls carry in their purses, and he was peering into it, holding it half-hidden under his left arm.

Jimmie held out his hand. Blue crackled a fresh pretzel out of its cellophane bag and slapped it into the child's palm just the way she'd hand over a scalpel in surgery. "He can't be shoplifting; that mirror makes him as conspicuous as a sequined shirt. Bird-watching is unlikely; and if the old fellow is flashing heliograph signals there's no cavalry troop in sight to receive 'em. Driver, I think we should shadow that shopping cart." Jimmie, despoiling his new pretzel, grinned saltily.

by Allen K. Lang



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The aisles of the supermarket were busy with the pick-something-up-for-supper-after-work bunch, so that Blue was able to hang back in the traffic as she tooled along in pursuit of the plump old man with the mirror. Beside the cracker display he stopped, tucked the mirror under his left arm, stared into it, then whirled about to look so intently at the shoppers behind him that he appeared to be counting them. He rolled on, only to repeat his charade beside beer-and-wine, then again opposite the soap gondolas.

"What do you think, partner?" Blue asked her boy. Jimmie crunched. "I think you'd better not spoil your supper, Bub."

Blue pushed along a little closer behind the man, absentmindedly filling her own grocery order. She peered ahead to see what her quarry had in his basket. "Looks like the kind of grub little boys carry up into tree houses," she reported to Jimmie. "Pickled pimento loaf, chocolate cupcakes, a big jar of—ugh!—artificial grape juice." She swung her cart around the corner, simultaneously smiling at the baby-nostalgic old lady who was chucking Jimmie under the chin and thwarting Jimmie's own attempt to poke over a pile of three-pound coffee cans with his pretzel-stick—and she was caught.

The old fellow stood there, white head tilted forward, pale-green eyes looking at her over rimless glasses. He took his mirror, the size of a playing card, from the pocket of his raincoat and twinkled it before Jimmie's face. The child chuckled and patted a crumby hand against his reflection. "Your little boy is an alert nine-month-old, Nurse," the gentleman said.

"You caught me stalking you, which makes you pretty alert yourself, sir," Blue said, smiling. "And you figured what my job is from these hideous white hose—no trick to that—but most men would have missed Jimmie's age by up to six months, and called him a girl for his curls."

"Hit it right on, eh?" The old fellow nodded. "I was working with babies when Ben Spock was still lining up lead soldiers." He held out his right hand. "Beer is the name. Herman Beer, Ph.D., psychologist. People tend to remember my last name, since it explains so succinctly my shape."

"Good evening, Dr. Beer," Blue said. "My friend here is James O'Leary Tulson, Junior; and I'm Mrs. James O. Tulson, Senior. Blue. And don't tell me that's a hound-dog name."

"My favorite color, and a lovely name," Dr. Beer said. He maneuvered them into a little backwater

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between the cheese cooler and a display of paper towels and halted. Taking Jimmie's free hand, not flinching a bit from its grubby moistness, he squeezed it. "Good afternoon, James," he said. "I judge you're the man of the house now, with your daddy being overseas."

Blue juggled her cart to make a pathway for a red-faced lady grimly rolling toward the chicken counter. "How in the world could you have known that?" she demanded.

Professor Beer beamed. "Another hit, eh? It's gratifying to jump to a conclusion and to land right on target. See here, young lady, you have one small pork chop in your shopping cart, so either there's a vegetarian in your family or your man is away somewhere. Since you're twenty-three years old . . .". Dr. Beer raised white eyebrows in question.

"Twenty-four next August," Blue admitted.

". . . he's of the age to have been gobbled into the Army. Were your soldier not overseas, he'd surely have wangled a pass to be with his bride and his boy this weekend, were he stationed as far away as Texas. But you have no groceries to feed him. So he's overseas."

Blue laughed. "Professor Beer, you should be sitting in a store window with a calico handkerchief tied over your head, telling fortunes at four bits a throw. You could use your little mirror for a crystal ball. Big Jim is doing his time in Korea, inspecting meat for the troops. He's a veterinarian, not a vegetarian. We hope he'll be back in time for Jimmie's second birthday party."

Dr. Beer glanced at his wristwatch. "Store closes at six," he said. "Got all you need?"

"We need junior carrots yet, and skimmed milk," she said.

"Skimmed milk for this young Hercules?" Dr. Beer demanded.

"For me," Blue explained. "This year's motto is 'Stay Slim for Jim.' "

"While James, Junior draws his milk from a handsomer container," Beer said. He drove ahead to find a carton of skimmed milk. "Why don't you find a mate for that pork chop you've got, Blue, and come over to my house for supper?"

"Well . . ."

"You cook for me, and I'll sing for my supper by telling you all about my monkeyshines with this mirror, the purpose of which you will otherwise never in a million years guess."

"I was going to wash my hair."

The professor winked. "Nurse Tulson, you surely are quick enough on your feet to evade a senile psychology teacher. If you judge me too mad to break bread with, I'll be doomed to dine alone

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on pimento loaf and cupcakes. Have mercy, Nurse."

"To hear some adult table talk, I'd welcome even a madman's dinner invitation," Blue admitted. "Professor, you're on." She wheeled briskly up to the chilled delicatessen shelves to select a big jar of four-bean salad, drove back to the meat counter to get a couple more pork chops, then headed for the bread racks to pick out two flutes of Italian bread to bake garlic butter into. "Get your favorite ice cream, Dr. Beer, and a jug of rosé wine."

"Burgundy," he called back. "We can't wait for wine to chill, with chops and conversation to sink our teeth into." He got the wine and the ice cream—black walnut—transferred everything from his shopping cart to Blue's, then took the helm to push the loaded cart, little Jim and all, into the checkout stream. "Charge me for all but the kid," he told the girl at the register. "Hand the Green Stamps to the lady in white."

"Dr. Beer . . ." Blue said, pushing a ten-dollar bill toward him.

"My treat," he growled. The register belled out $12.48. "And cheap it is for a home-cooked dinner," he added, counting coins and bills from his pinch-clasp purse. Somewhat to Blue's surprise, he handed her the shopping bag; then he held out his arms for Jimmie. Without any fuss the little boy allowed this white-haired stranger to pick him up. "I drove over," the professor said.

"I walked. The half-mile jaunt from our apartment and back pays my dues for a beer with supper," she explained.

"My doctor took me off beer after my heart attack," the old man said. "He tried to get me off food, to boot. Here's my chariot." He set Jimmie on his hip in order to get out his keys—and unlock what appeared to be a model space capsule. The upper jaw of the little red bug hinged up, revealing two kindergarten-size bucket seats set into its throat, one behind the other. Blue tucked the bag of groceries into a pocket behind the rear seat and ducked under the lid to sit down. "Strap in, and hold tight to Junior," Beer said, handing her the baby. He eased his belly under the tiny steering wheel and pulled the roof of the mini-car down to latch it. "We're off!" The engine started with the roar of a giant mouse.

Blue Tulson was grateful for the webbing that held her to her seat. Professor Beer drove like a ten-year-old with a free pass on the Dodgem cars. He cornered the scarlet bug at ninety degrees to leave the parking lot. He arrowed between a city bus and six tons of armored truck to cross an inter-

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section on the yellow light, then slalomed down a side street spotted with Detroit iron, alerting pedestrians and policemen to their peril by pounding the side of his fist against the horn, which yelped like a tail-trod puppy. Jimmie hammered his own fists against his belly and chortled encouragement to the driver. Just as Blue was thinking about leaping out at the first red light, the tiny car shot up a driveway and into an open carport, where it squealed to a halt. Dr. Beer popped open the lid. "Twenty seconds off my previous record," he announced.

"And twenty months off my life expectancy," Blue said, unclenching her muscles and releasing her seat belt. "First rocket trip I ever took." She stepped out with Jimmie in her arms to inspect the professor's homestead. A plaster dinosaur stalked across his front lawn, intent on the shy iron deer across the street. The shutters that framed the two street-side windows were painted red-and-white checkerboard like a pizzeria tablecloth. The house itself was the color of strawberry sherbet. Behind the carport was a sloping cellar door, with a little window to either side.

"Like it?" Dr. Beer asked, unlocking the door under the carport.

"Neat but not gaudy, like the Devil's tail," Blue said.

"Perhaps less neat within," the professor cautioned her, switching on the light.

"Heavens!" The room they stood in had to be the kitchen, else that refrigerator and gas stove were sadly out of place, but this was a kitchen marinated, sautéed, garnished with books. Books were on the floor, books against the walls, books hanging ripe to avalanche from every horizontal surface. A shelf had been nailed to the lintel over each of the two doorways, where ranks of frayed, gray-backed journals lined up like squads of walking wounded. A decade of *Science* filled the niche between the pantry cabinet and the corner, bookended between the ceiling and the floor, with little tongues of paper sticking out to mark the index issues. "What would happen," Blue demanded, "if you had a fire?"

"A lot of nonsense would get burned up," Dr. Beer replied. He set down the shopping bag to help her find a seat, pushing to the floor a stack of bound *Parapsychology Abstracts*. "From all this chaff, I may winnow out so much grain to serve my mill." Dr. Beer held his fingers, pinched close together, under Blue's nose.

"What is your special interest, Professor?" Blue asked, helping Jimmie out of his yellow knit sweater.

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The old man grinned. "Supper."

"So be a baby-sitter." Blue spied a black iron skillet, presently filled with typewritten three-by-five cards. She dumped the file into an empty Dutch oven. "I'm going to cook you creole pork chops." She riffled books aside in the white pantry cabinet. "Good; here's bay leaf, and your pepper grinder. Go clear a table for us to eat from, Professor, and entertain Jimmie till I call you to come and help tote out the food."

Dr. Beer managed, while watching the baby, to dig out a linen tablecloth and napkins, to dust the chairs, and to clear the carpet of books along a trail from kitchen to dining room, lining them up like a low flagstone wall on either side. Jimmie crawled about, pushing over the stacks, followed by Dr. Beer on his knees, setting the stacks aright again, pleased that the child required no more formal amusement.

The Burgundy was just right with the creole chops; the hash-brown potatoes were ready just as the chops left the skillet; the baby was dry and happy; the meal was a success.

"I'll wash the dishes after breakfast tomorrow," Dr. Beer said, finishing the last of the quart of black walnut ice cream, half-hidden under butterscotch syrup. "This evening is too rare to spend it up to one's elbows in detergent."

"I'd rather hear about your work than scour that skillet," Blue Tulson admitted. She sniffed at the glass of brandy Dr. Beer had poured from a dusty bottle, and let a drop touch her tongue.

The professor observed Blue's glance down toward her son, who was having his dinner now, and smiled. "A little brandy in his milk will do him no harm," he said. "And, though my degree is not in medicine, I can pose as something of an authority on spirits."

"Ghosts?" Blue asked.

"If you insist, yes. Ghosts," Dr. Beer said.

"Why in the world—"

"When I was a boy, just after my seventh birthday party, I was going upstairs in my grandmother's red brick farmhouse, just outside Richmond, Indiana. I had nearly reached the top of the stairway when a man came stomping down the stairs toward me, wearing a gray coat and hobnailed boots. The man had no head."

Blue laughed. "What did you do?"

"As he was obviously my elder, I politely stepped aside and let him pass," the professor said.

Blue settled back in the big red overstuffed chair, Jimmie cuddled in close. "And you've been follow-

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ing that headless soldier ever since," she said.

"You're quite correct, young lady," Dr. Beer said. "I've trudged after him through *academia,* through the folklore forests of Europe and Asia, through libraries without count. What I've discovered is that ever so many reputable people have seen ghosts; but there's no smidgen of experimental evidence as to the existence of disembodied spirits." He tilted another inch of brandy into his glass. "More for you?"

"No, thank you. And, if you're to drive us home . . ."

"Save coffee, this is my last drink for the evening," the old man promised. "To get back to ghosts: you were wondering about my antics with the mirror in the supermarket aisles. Are you aware that the store was built on the site of our old Municipal Hospital?"

"That was years before I was capped," Blue said.

"In your profession, I'm sure you've seen people die."

Blue nodded.

"There are easy deaths, blunted by surprise or by morphine; and there are deaths that strike with terror. I know this latter sort myself."

"Your heart attack?" Blue asked.

He nodded. "Had I died then, I've no doubt that I'd have haunted my sickroom for months," he said. He was not smiling. "So you see, my dear, of those hundreds—thousands—of souls who died in that old hospital, filled with longing for life and horror of death, some few must yet be in the atmosphere, though the building is gone, hovering there like psychic stains, unwilling to stay and yet unable to leave for a higher plane. I was searching for such spirits with my mirror. I believe I caught sight of one, a very old lady wearing a disgraceful tobacco-sack gown of the sort you people give the patients. She was tiptoeing between the shopping carts, her head down, weeping."

"I didn't see her," Blue said.

"You're as matter-of-fact as an emetic basin," Dr. Beer said. "You've not got an ounce of the medium in your makeup. I have the talent to some degree, as my boyhood glimpse of the headless soldier demonstrated. So I saw the old woman as clearly as I see you; but when I turned to observe her in the mirror, she was invisible. This is a true litmus for the supernatural, Mrs. Tulson, attested in a hundred folktales."

"I believe you," Blue said, "but what you're telling me is still just an anecdote, like your headless man. Your experiment with your mirror proved only to you that there was a ghost back at the supermarket. Nor

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were you surprised, Dr. Beer. Nor will anyone who doubts, be convinced by what you saw."

"Blue, you're a clever girl." Dr. Beer lit a cigar. "I'm allowed three of these a day," he said. "Are you really interested in my hobby, or are you being polite?"

"I'm fascinated," the nurse said. She glanced at her watch. "If I didn't have to get Jimmie to bed and me up in the morning, I'd talk ghosts with you till cockcrow."

Dr. Beer heaved himself up from his chair and shuffled toward the kitchen. "I'll put on water for our instant coffee," he said. He came back, his slippers scraping across the kitchen linoleum and scuffing up little puffs of dust from the dining-room carpet. "There's an experiment I'd like to describe to you. My laboratory, if I may dignify it by so formal a name, is in the cellar. Here, we'll make a baby cage for the little man." He set a chair across the front of his sofa, and reached to get a second chair. He was breathless with the slight exertion.

"Let me do it," Blue insisted. She stood, put the sleeping baby down, and picked up a chair to complete the barricade across the front of the sofa. "I'll make the coffee." By the time she'd spooned the brown powder into two cups, the water was on full boil. "Here you are," she said, handing Dr. Beer his cup. "Sure it won't keep you awake?"

"My doctor gave me some pillow-pills," he said. "Come on downstairs. Bring your coffee, so it won't get cold."

The old man shuffled down the stairs like a small child; left foot down a step, right foot down to join it, then a pause to gain his breath and his balance. He held tightly to the steel-pipe handrail with his left hand. "Let me carry your coffee," Blue suggested.

The professor handed the cup to her and grimaced. "Slow business," he said. "I can only move fast when I'm driving." He made it down to the next step.

"Take your time," Blue said.

He at last reached the bottom and toggled on the cellar light.

"This is your laboratory?" the nurse asked.

The floor was packed gray sand, across which a few flagstones had been placed to make a walkway in wet weather. A card table stood on three legs against one wall, propped up on a spillikin-stack of broken screen frames. One of the chairs that had come with the crippled table perched on a flagstone at the center of the floor, facing a dark alcove set in under the kitchen. The windows were whitewashed blank. A five-gallon can, its top cut off, stood beneath one win-

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dow; stuck into it, like a soda straw into a paper cup, was a length of corrugated rainspout.

"Is this where you catch your ghosts, Dr. Beer?" Blue asked.

He settled himself carefully onto the folding chair and accepted back his coffee. "I need very few instruments for my work," he said. "All that I really require is in that little room directly behind you."

She turned to look into the alcove.

"Watch your head!" Dr. Beer cried, pointing to the dusty stringers above her.

Blue, glancing up to the ceiling to make sure she didn't bang her head, stepped into the alcove. A piece of string caught across her left ankle. Blue turned as the gate slammed down, six inches from her face. The trip-wire of the trap lay loose on the sandy floor. Dr. Beer was on his feet outside the gate, his teeth clenched in concentration as he fit a chain between the steel door and a bar bolted into the wall. As the girl pushed against the cage door, he was clapping two links of chain together in the hasp of a padlock.

"It worked," he gasped. "I wasn't sure it would, but it worked perfectly." He staggered back to his chair and sank down.

Careful not to spill the coffee, Blue set her cup down onto the damp floor. She went to the grating that had hinged down from the ceiling to encage her and shook it. All the joints and fastenings were loose, but they were linked as surely as the chain that held the door. "A fascinating home-workshop project, Professor," she said. "Now will you please let me out? Jimmie may need me."

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"You'll never get out," Dr. Beer said. "Jimmie will never see you again. Where you are, you're going to stay. Step carefully, or you may break your leg."

Blue looked into the dimness at the back of her cell. There was a hole dug into the floor, three feet wide and as long as she was tall, filled with darkness. "A grave," she said.

"You'd never believe the labor I put in," Professor Beer said. He got up to put his coffee cup on the seat of his chair, and went back to get a spade that had been propped against the wall. "I built that gate out of ornamental iron and carriage bolts; hoisted it to the ceiling with a block and tackle. Nearly killed myself getting the hinges in, all by myself, and digging your grave. Then went out to find you, my first subject."

"Why didn't you just hit me over the head with a scrap of your ornamental iron?" Blue asked.

"Without painful anticipation, you'd not likely become a ghost," Dr. Beer explained. "If death were all it took to make a ghost, our highways would be four million miles of Halloween." He started to cough, bending over to prop himself on the spade, easing the spasm in his diaphragm. "I should have brought the brandy down," he said. "The dampness here chokes me." He sipped the last of his coffee instead, and dropped the empty cup to the floor. "To make a ghost of you, my dear, I have to assure you of an unhappy death. Too bad, but the rules of the revenant are as strict as those of physics." He sketched an oblong in the sand with his spade. "It's not your pious folk, dying in the comfort of their family, buried with flowers and prayers, who ripen into ghosts. No; it's the ill-cut-off. It takes a miserable death to make a spirit stay to mourn himself. All the literature attests to this." He chunked the spade into the gray sand and turned over a little wedge of it, showing clean yellow underneath. "I regret, of course, the inconvenience this causes you, Blue."

"It's not necessary to apologize to one's laboratory animals," she said.

"No, of course; but the social conventions still oblige me," Dr. Beer said.

"How will you kill me?" she asked. "Hit me with that spade?"

Beer sighed back into his chair and rested the spade across his knees. "I've considered several methods," he said. "A gun, the garrote, hanging . . . However, lacking a degree of cooperation from my subject which I have no right to expect, any of these methods require a physical strength I no

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longer have. So I've chosen cyanide gas."

"Hydrogen cyanide," Blue said, her face pale behind the ornate iron curlicues.

"You know more chemistry than I," Dr. Beer admitted. "I'll take half a dozen sodium cyanide eggs. . ." He shuffled over to the corner of the cellar and lifted the lid off a large can. ". . . take them outside, and roll them through the window, down that drainpipe." He held up the pellet, goose-egg in size, for Blue to see, and indicated the downspouting that led from the window into the five-gallon can. "There's acid in the can. You'll be dead before long. I'll prop both windows open from the outside to air out the cellar. Then I'll bury the both of you."

"Both?" Blue whispered. She looked at the outline the old man had sketched before her cell with his spade. Carved a dimension deeper, it would be a baby's bed. "Jimmie!" she screamed.

"Shhh!" Beer raised his hand. "Let the child sleep while he can."

"Why kill my little boy?"

"It's the rules," the professor said, his face crumpled with grief. "I've got to make you die as miserably as possible, to assure myself that you'll haunt this cellar. I don't want to waste your death, Blue. What could better assure that you die in misery, than the knowledge that your child will die after you? Believe me, I'll smother him mercifully. But he is a necessary ingredient to my experiment." Beer replaced his poisoned egg with its fellows in the can and picked up the spade. "Yes, let the little fellow sleep."

"No," Blue cried. The bars chattered and squeaked as she shook them, but they did not yield. "You can't." She sank down onto the floor, her hands still grasping the bottom rail of the gate.

"You'll ruin your uniform," Dr. Beer observed. He set aside the spade and scuffed across to a pile of debris stacked against the cold furnace. He selected a carton, folded flat now, and went over to the cage to push it in to Blue. She seized a corner of the cardboard and tugged at it so fiercely that the old man's head banged into the gate.

"Damn," he said, stepping back and dragging his palm across his forehead. "Can't blame you, Nurse, but that hurt me." He gestured at the cardboard she had now in the cell. "Spread it out. Be comfortable."

"What will you do when I'm dead? After you've killed my baby?" Blue asked.

"I'll bury you and wait." Beer sat down, his hands folded in his lap, lecturing as though she were a class.

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"I've given this a good deal of thought. My observations, though expert, are subjective. They must be backed by physical evidence—photographs. Yes; I've a camera upstairs, loaded with the fastest film, prepared to photograph your ghost, Blue. And I shall record any temperature changes coincident with your appearances. Should you make any sounds, be assured they will be faithfully recorded on magnetic tape."

"I'm so proud," Blue said.

"Don't jest. This is serious scientific research," Dr. Beer said. He picked up his spade and commenced again gouging out the baby's grave. After three spadesful he stopped, leaned on the handle and coughed out a dozen racking syllables.

"If you'll sit still for a moment and take a dozen deep breaths, it will ease that tightness inside your chest," Blue observed. "You wouldn't want another heart attack before you finished this experiment, would you?"

"Thank you, Nurse." Professor Beer sat on his folding chair and gasped deliberately, his mouth hanging open. He paused, sat very still as though listening to the machinery within his chest, then smiled. "Much better," he reported. "Don't know how to thank you."

"I shouldn't have cooked you that heavy dinner," Blue said. "Pork chops with potatoes, bread and butter, ice cream with walnuts and butterscotch sauce. My goodness, Professor, if I'd wanted to give you another coronary I couldn't have planned your menu better. And the cigar you smoked. Heavens!" She paused. "Do you still have that dull pain behind your breastbone?"

He looked at the girl, startled, his right fist resting on his chest like a blunt stethoscope. "How do you know?" he whispered.

"I've attended a lot of men your age," Blue said. "Overweight. Bad cardiac history. Too much food and coffee and brandy. Incinerating tobacco by the pound. You beat Attack Number One, Dr. Beer, but you're a sitting duck for Attack Two—and that one's the killer."

"I cannot afford to die now," the old man said, each word deliberate. He stabbed the spade into the sand, and flung the little he'd gouged out toward the wall. "All my life I've tried to prove with witnesses and recording devices that the things I've seen are as real as the wind and cosmic rays. For the first time, now, for the first time in man's history, there will be a controlled experiment in the postmortem survival of human personality." He tossed another spadeful of yellow sand into the corner.

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"Just relax," Blue crooned. "Forget that pump that sits between your lungs, scarred already and going too fast right now. Take it easy."

Professor Beer dropped the spade. Jimmie's grave was now four inches deep. "It's really there, that dull pain, like you described it." He sat, staring straight ahead, his left hand pressing his right fist to his chest wall to feel the heavy muscle thudding inside him.

"Do you have an oxygen cylinder handy?" Blue asked quietly. "Just in case?"

"I never thought . . . My doctor never said . . ." He jumped up. "I'll keep going," he cried hoarsely. "I will not die before this experiment is recorded." He trudged over to get his cyanide eggs, his old legs moving slowly, as though he were wading calf-deep through water. "I must complete it and write everything up, with photos and charts and bibliography," he said. He tucked two of the big eggs into one pocket, two into another. "Goodbye, Blue. I'll see you later. On the far side." He shuffled toward the stairs.

"What is your pulse rate now, Professor?" Blue asked, her voice low.

The old man felt his wrist. "My watch is too small," he said. "I can't see to time it."

"Here." Blue unstrapped hers, a round, no-nonsense, nurse's wristwatch, large enough to read without squinting, with a sweep-second hand. She reached through the bars to set the watch well out from her cage. "Use mine, Professor."

Dr. Beer walked back from the stairway with as delicate a tread as though he were balancing his heart right in the middle of his torso, and as though it would shatter if he allowed it to roll an inch to either side. His trouser pockets bulged obscenely with the four cyanide eggs. He stood before the cage door, looking down at the watch that lay between the dusty toes of his slippers. "I don't want to bend down," he said.

"So give me your wrist," Blue ordered. She picked up her watch and held it in her left hand as she took the old man's wrist, thrust between the bars, in her right. The only sound for a full minute was his shallow breathing. Dr. Beer stared at the watch in the nurse's hand as though willing it to give him a good count. "Not good," Blue sighed.

He tugged to get his wrist out of her grasp. Blue let him go. "I want to take you upstairs, put you to bed with your feet elevated," she said. "Herman, you need your doctor. You need oxygen at your bedside."

Dr. Beer shuffled back from the

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gate. "I've no time," he whispered. "Must kill you at once for my proof. Experimental production of human revenant. First on record. Publication in *Nature*. Vindication of my life's work. Show those fools at Urbana." He moved toward the stairs, each slipper forward three inches at a time, like a very careful walker on the ice.

"Stop. Rest a moment," Blue said, her voice very soft. "Your heart is racing too fast. It's beating against the bone wall that holds it in." Beer paused for a bit, his hand against his chest. "The arteries over the crown of your heart are ballooning out with the pressure of each beat," the nurse said, a little louder now. "Somewhere in your body a blood clot is racing toward a crossroad in those arteries, where it will jam and shock you like a bolt of electricity in your heart." She shouted the last few words.

Dr. Herman Beer began to totter. His knees were bent; his right shoulder sloped toward the cellar floor.

"Let me help you," Blue cried. "Let me help you stay alive."

"Too late," he said. "I feel that clot swirling along through my blood, swimming through my chest to kill me."

"Come over here, Herman," Blue said, holding both hands through the cage door, on one either side of the center bar. "I can save you."

He started coughing. A little red fleck appeared on his lower lip. He brushed it away and looked down at the stain on his hand.

"Come on, Herman. A few steps this way, then you can rest and be cared for," Blue coaxed.

"Help me," he said. He set one foot ahead of the other and leaned over it, then repeated the sequence to inch nearer her. "I'm dying. With my work undone, I'm dying."

"Just a little closer," Blue said. The old man slumped against the bars and slid down them. His head would have rapped against the steel padlock but that Blue caught it and set him easy against the bars. She rolled out the poison eggs to search his pockets. A ring of keys was in one, but none of the keys matched the padlock. A wadded handkerchief, last washed when Truman was President, was in the other pocket. "Where's the key?" she asked, making each word very clear, speaking directly into his uptilted ear.

"Around my neck," he sighed. "Help me."

The key was tied onto a loop of grocery string slipped over his head. Blue broke the string to free the key, leaned tight against the bars to angle her fingers around, and turned the key in the padlock. The hasp fell open.

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Gently, Blue pushed outward on the door, scooting the now-silent Dr. Herman Beer back a couple of feet till she could crawl beneath the steel frame to lie beside him. "Professor?" she asked.

"I'm dying," he said. "Blue, I wouldn't have harmed your baby. It was only necessary that you think I would. Oh, it hurts. I'm so afraid."

"Breathe in as deeply as you can," Blue said. "Suck in all the air you can. This oxygen is as good as the bottled, and free. I'm going to call an ambulance. We'll save you."

Beer tried to breathe as Blue had instructed him. He coughed. "Too late," he said.

"I talked you into having this attack, and I'm going to get you through it," Blue said. She lifted his head and turned it so that it would rest more easily, then slipped a corner of the cardboard box beneath it. He lay parallel to the shallow groove that was to have been Jimmie's grave. "Poor old mad fellow," she said. "Be easy; your heart can pump you through another half-dozen birthdays."

"Nurse, I can feel it, as though my belly is on fire," he said. "And the clamps are closing; my ribs are getting tighter." He struggled to sit up.

"Breathe, breathe," Blue said.

"Dying in misery, I'll likely become a ghost myself," Dr. Beer said. "Will you come back to watch for me? To photograph me? The camera is ready, in my closet upstairs."

"I will," Blue promised. She eased him down again, ready to run upstairs to phone for help.

"So I will be the first." He coughed, and smiled through the red froth on his lips. "Experimental demonstration of survival of personality. Write me up. Herman Beer is the name. Ph.D." He coughed again, a sort of half-cough, with no answering rebound of the lungs.

After she'd made her phone call and seen that Jimmie was sleeping warmly, Blue got the old man's camera from the closet and went downstairs to sit beside his corpse, the camera in her lap. If he came back, she'd get his picture. It was the least she could do for him.

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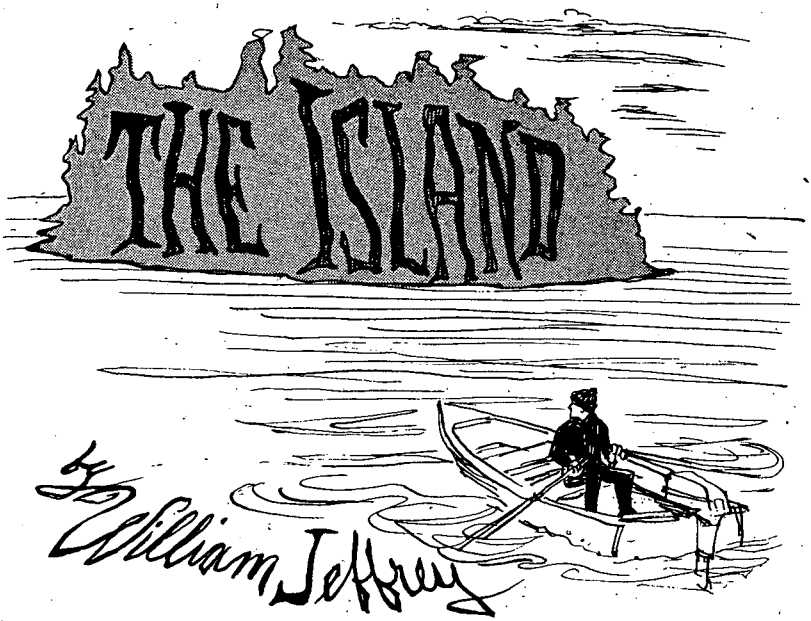
An assignment need not be difficult when, with a little more effort on someone's part, it may be (nearly) impossible.

THE ISLAND



by William Jeffrey

WHEN FLAGG was within two hundred yards of the island's leeward shore, he cut off the muted throb of the skiff's 10-horsepower outboard and used the oars to take him the rest of the way in. He grounded the skiff at the corner of a slender strip of gravel beach that gleamed whitely in the darkness—the only spot other than the man-made inlet on the north shore where a boat could be landed safely. He tilted the outboard out of the water, then dragged the small craft into a shelter of pines and thickly-grown ferns. There was no moon, and the stars winked coldly, distantly in the night sky. It was a few minutes past eleven.

Flagg knew that the island was a

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quarter-mile wide and a half-mile long, and he knew all of its contours and contents; Churlak had given him an air reconnaissance map just before Flagg had left San Francisco for Seattle the previous afternoon. He set out to the north, skirting a wooded knoll. Dressed in black clothing and black woolen cap, he was just another shadow etched against the motionless, ebony waters of Rosario Strait.

Several minutes later, using an alternating route through trees and along the rocky shore, he had come around to the inlet where Parish kept his rented, twenty-foot inboard-outboard cruiser.

He paused in the pines which ringed the small cove, listening for the dogs. He heard nothing, but that didn't have to mean much. The dogs were Dobermans, a breed that, if properly trained, would strike as silently and as swiftly as a sniper under the cloak of darkness—and Parish's dogs were reputed to be well-trained.

There were two boats tied at the end of the long wooden pier which jutted out like a pointing finger into the cove: the cruiser, and a fourteen-foot skiff that was reminiscent of the one in which Flagg had arrived. The skiff undoubtedly belonged to the man named Denman, who was the island's permanent caretaker.

Flagg moved to where he could look upward along the sloping path leading from the pier to the brick-and-pillared main house. It sat high on the bluff which comprised the eastern section of the island, screened by trees. There were no lights that he could see. Silhouetted against the night sky, the house had a Gothic look about it that might have amused Flagg in another situation; the owner, a Seattle businessman, had built it for his wife in the mid-Fifties, the wife had tired of it, and now it was rented to anyone who had enough money and enough desire to want to live on his own private island. Parish had plenty of both, but his reasons went deeper than that—which was why Flagg was here.

He slipped out of the trees, running silently on canvas shoes, keeping to shadow as much as he could. At the base of the pier, he crouched behind a small structure which might have been used as a boathouse. Silence held, except for the soft and serene lapping of water against the wooden pilings, for the cry of a nightbird in the surrounding forest. There was no movement anywhere.

Where were the dogs? Flagg wondered. He had been expecting trouble with them all along, which was the reason he had brought along the hunting knife and the si-

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lent, compressed-air gun which were tucked into the utility belt at his waist. He hadn't been worried about Denman; the caretaker went to bed early and let the dogs do his patrolling for him. So where were the dogs?

Flagg pondered the question for a time, and then decided that they were probably after something—ground squirrels, rodents—on the other side of the island. He didn't have time to worry about it. Moving carefully, he edged away from the boathouse and started out along the pier, running bent over to lower his silhouette against the horizon.

When he reached the end of the pier he went to his knees beside the skiff, dropped down into it, and unbolted the engine from the transom. He allowed it to sink into the black water, paused to listen, and then took out the oars and pushed them away. He crawled along to the cruiser and swung into the stern, found the engine compartment and lifted the housing. It took him ten seconds to remove the rotor and sink it into the water. He lowered the housing, climbed onto the pier again, and ran back to the boathouse. Still there was no sound, no movement.

Flagg stepped out and began to sprint upward along the slope, moving parallel to the crushed oyster-shell path. He had to reach the side gardens now, and the only other way would have been to go through the thick undergrowth between them and the boathouse. He was more vulnerable and exposed this way, but it was quieter and there was less chance of attracting the dogs.

The gardens had been built in tiers, half rock and half shrubbery with strips of grass. They arced around to the northern face of the bluff, ending with a cliff that dropped away to the strait on one side, and small flagstone steps cut into the bluff on the other. Flagg ducked through a hedge and began to scale the narrow, slick steps; from the aerial map, he remembered that they connected with a patio which extended the rear width of the house.

He was halfway up when a muffled and yet explosive report shattered the nocturnal quiet.

Flagg stopped, his right hand on the air gun at his waist. It had been the unmistakably gutty eruption of a shotgun, and the blast had come from above and to his right, a short distance away. He waited another second or two, ears straining, but quiet had settled on the night again. Taking the remaining steps two at a time, he gained the patio and crouched behind a low concrete wall. The air gun was in his hand now, his finger hard against the

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trigger, and he listened intently.

One ground-floor room on his right was lighted, a dim yellow glow spilling through a series of narrow-paned French windows and drawn curtains. The back of the house was otherwise as dark as the front had been. Softly, Flagg trod between the maze of wrought-iron garden furniture spread across the patio, coming up to one side of the windows. He peered through the glass and the semi-opaqueness of the curtains.

The room was obviously a study. There was a small, ornately decorated fireplace surrounded by glass-doored bookcases. Niches between the cases were filled with ponderous oil portraits, age having dulled them to the point of obscurity. At the far end of the study was a massive hardwood desk of the Empire period; its surface was taken up with a brass ash tray, a gooseneck lamp with its crown tilted over an electric typewriter. Behind the desk was a padded leather swivel chair, canted to one side, and sitting in the chair was a white-haired, heavy-jawed man Flagg knew to be Eric Parish.

Parish appeared extremely relaxed sitting there, his hands draped loosely in his lap, his head resting gently against the high, open collar of his white shirt. His eyes were open and half-lidded as though filled with sleepiness. The dark, round hole between them leaked blood over the bridge of his nose in a congealing stream.

Flagg put on a pair of thin leather gloves to twist the handle on one of the French doors; it was locked. With the butt of the air gun he broke one of the panes, reached in and unlatched the door. The sound of the glass breaking hadn't been particularly loud, and the patio remained empty, the night silent. He slipped into the room, stepping around the shards of broken glass now cushioned on the thick carpeting, and crossed hurriedly to the dead man.

In addition to the neat little hole in Parish's forehead, there was a gaping, jagged-edged exit wound the size of a silver dollar that had stained his white hair a dull crimson. Following an imaginary line of trajectory, Flagg found another hole in the wood paneling behind and to one side of Parish. Turning then, he saw the inner door, and it was obvious to him that somebody Parish had known had stood there, perhaps just entering or leaving—and Parish, swiveled in that direction, had been shot before he'd been aware of the threat.

Flagg set about searching both the study and Parish's body. The dead man's wallet, diamond ring, and expensive watch hadn't been

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touched. The desk drawers were filled with odds and ends, typing paper, a checkbook drawn on a Bellingham bank and showing a large balance in five figures. The electric typewriter still hummed softly, but there were no written or typed-papers either on the desk, in the typewriter, or anywhere else in the room. Flagg stood staring down at Parish with a tight feeling of frustration and impotent anger in his throat.

The assignment had somehow gotten screwed up before he'd even been able to start it. Parish's death in itself wasn't regrettable; it was the fact that the papers were missing which made it as bad as it was.

Parish had been one of the Organization's top men in the Washington, D.C. area for a number of years, living the fat-cat life in Alexandria, Virginia. Then there had been a death in one of the Families, and a subsequent struggle for control; new leaders with new brooms had come on the scene, and Parish had suddenly found himself in danger of being swept out by young blood with stronger Organizational ties. Embittered and vengeful, Par-

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sh had denounced the Circle and had then dropped out of sight.

Shortly afterward, the Organization had learned through informants that he was planning to write a book. *The* book, the biggest and the most volatile yet, naming names and including documentation not only of past history but of current operations as well. Considering his position in the nation's capital, his revelations would have caused a scandal of unprecedented proportions, and nobody on either side of the legal fence wanted that to happen.

But Parish had been hard to find. He'd planned well, coming cross-country and renting the cruiser and this island hideaway by proxy. The island was one of the smallest in a series between the coast of Washington and the southern tip of Vancouver Island. Volcanic in origin, some of the islands were quite large—such as Orcas Island, which had seven small communities on it. Others were unnamed vacation spots only big enough for one or two houses, and were the exclusive retreats for the well-to-do of nearby Seattle and Bellingham.

The waters surrounding the islands were frigid and treacherous, a mixture of currents from the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the Strait of Georgia. The mainland could be reached only by boat, either private or the twice-daily ferry which plied between Sidney, British Columbia, and Anacortes, Washington. Eric Parish had found the perfect location at which to write his book without interference—or so he'd thought.

With the word out, and thousands of informants looking for him, his hiding place had finally been pinpointed in spite of all his precautions. The Washington, D.C. branch of the Organization had immediately contacted the head of the West Coast Security Division, a man named Churlak; and Churlak had assigned Flagg, his primary troubleshooter.

Flagg had rented a car in Seattle and driven to Anacortes, then had taken the morning ferry to Orcas Island and driven around to the opposite side to the hamlet of Doebay, the nearest port to Parish's island. Arrangements had already been made with a Northwest contact, and Flagg had found a boat waiting for him there, all the gear he would need, and an assurance that Parish was home. He had waited until ten o'clock and then he had begun the cold, silent crossing.

The idea hadn't been to kill Parish; his sudden death might have caused more trouble in the long run than the book itself, especially if Parish had managed to cover himself with some sort of insurance.

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The Organization hadn't even been overly concerned with the publication of a book—books were always being written about the Organization—just as long as that one dealt only with past matters and with nothing happening now in areas like the nation's capital. Flagg's mission was merely to talk to Parish, to convince him that he was vulnerable no matter where he hid, to persuade him to hand over his notes and papers. Failing that, Flagg had been instructed to take all documentation one way or another.

Only now somebody else had gotten to Parish and to the papers first. Why? And who? And what had been the significance of the shot Flagg had heard as he was climbing the outside steps? It had been a shotgun blast, all right—*not* a small-caliber weapon of the type which had killed Parish . . .

Flagg moved across the study to the door, and went down a short hallway. Darkness and silence filled the massive house. He glided through the downstairs rooms—parlor, kitchen, pantry, servant's quarters—and found no sign of anyone. A curving staircase led up to the second floor bedrooms, and a quick search there yielded him nothing either.

Downstairs again, Flagg went to the front entrance, slipped through onto a wide veranda cluttered with wicker chairs and settees, with ferns and plants in narrow boxes. To one side of the house, set into the trees, was a smaller dwelling, obviously the caretaker's cottage. A dim light burned in a room on the facing side, casting pale illumination at the edges of the night; it hadn't been on when he'd looked up at the house from the inlet earlier.

With the air gun clenched tightly in his fist, Flagg moved down off the porch and made his way across to a large alder which grew a few feet from the front door. He paused there, watching, listening. After a time he moved forward, put his back to the wall next to the door. The cottage was quiet—too quiet. Flagg reached out with his left hand and rotated the knob on the door, felt it turn. He set himself, shoved open the door, and went into the cottage in a low crouch, the gun leveled and ready.

A tall, thin man lay in the middle of the circular livingroom rug, sprawled on his back; his head had been nearly severed from his body. The wall behind him was peppered with buckshot, spattered with blood and bone and brain. Flagg kicked the door shut and went through the cottage quickly. It was empty save for the dead man, and there was no sign of the missing papers.

He went out through the rear

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door. Just beyond the cottage, on a bed of pine needles and leaf mold, he discovered the reason why he hadn't been bothered by the dogs; the two sleek, black Dobermans lay twenty feet from one another, stiff and dead. They had each been shot once in the head with the same type of gun that had killed Parish.

Flagg worked his tongue over dry lips, and moved away in the shadows, to the side of the brick-and-pillared mansion. He stood in darkness there, letting thoughts run free in his mind, trying to put it all together. Parish dead; Denman dead; the dogs dead. Parish and the Dobermans shot with a handgun, the caretaker with a shotgun. Who? And why?

Well, all right. There were no answers to those questions just yet. He had to look at it from the standpoint of what he *did* know, of what seemed logical. To begin with, whoever had been responsible for the carnage tonight had been after the papers and notes for Parish's book, for some as yet unknown reason. Flagg would have found them if it had been otherwise; Parish would have had them by the typewriter, where he'd obviously been working when he was shot. Flagg knew, too, that Parish had apparently been killed by someone he knew—a house guest, maybe—and that it was unlikely, owing to the contours of the island, that another boat of requisite size could be secreted along the shoreline.

That meant the killer had very likely been planning to use either Parish's cruiser or the caretaker's skiff to make his escape—and since Flagg had disabled both craft, the killer, and the papers, were still somewhere on the island.

Flagg had to believe that was the way it was; if it were any other way, there was nothing he could do. His first thought was to check the cove. He moved away from the house again and ran silently to the path and down it, letting darkness camouflage him. Crouched at the bole of an oak, he looked out at the pier, at the near-motionless boats tied there. Nothing stirred.

Flagg swore mentally. Now what? The killer could be anywhere, hiding, waiting, searching. He had no idea how well the guy—assuming it was a man—knew the island. One thing was certain, though: if the killer had intended to use one of the craft out there, and had come down here to find them disabled, he had to know that there was someone else on the island besides himself; someone alive and with a purpose.

What would *he* do, then?

He wouldn't know who Flagg was, or why he was on the island, but he would have to know that the

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intruder had come by boat—the only boat that was operable now. There was only one thing he *could* do: search out and appropriate Flagg's craft.

The search could take a matter of minutes, if the guy knew the island, or an hour or more if he didn't; but eventually he was bound to find the gravel beach and the hidden skiff. If he were able to do that before Flagg found him—if he were able to make good his escape with Parish's papers—Flagg would be trapped on an island with two dead men, and a mission in ruin.

He crossed the path running, and plunged into the dense woods, moving as fast as he could in darkness and unfamiliar surroundings. The forest was oddly silent, save for an occasional rustling of an animal or a bird, and somehow it gave the impression of vastness far out of proportion to its size. Flagg knew that misdirection was an immediate danger, and he tried to keep the murmuring of the ocean strong in his right ear, an infrequent glimpse of the mansion visible over his left shoulder—due south in as straight a line as possible. The house remained jagged and dark against the paler night sky, but the forest seemed to continue endlessly through a series of small slopes and valleys, thick with brush and trees. The evergreens took on strange shapes as urgency grew inside him and the slender strip of beach failed to appear.

Flagg topped a knoll, thinking that it could be the one he had skirted earlier after beaching the skiff, but beyond it was a higher elevation, rocky and densely grown. He came down off the hill, crossed the brief valley below, and scrambled upward again through several gnarled oaks growing bent from the wind. When he had reached the crest, breathing heavily, he saw the beach below him, clear and empty and still gleaming a faint white.

He worked moisture through his mouth, peering into the darkness. He saw nothing. As rapidly and as silently as he was able, he went down the hill to the beach, clawing at the earth with his hands, grasping plants and saplings to maintain his balance. In spite of his efforts at stealth, a shower of loose stones and dirt cascaded with him. He reached the bottom, then eased around an outcropping of rock until he saw where he had dragged the skiff into shelter. The craft was still there—untouched.

Ten feet beyond the end of the beach was a marshy hollow, filled with thorn bushes and young firs—a place to hide, a place to wait. Flagg started there, the compressed-air gun held in close to his body. He

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was two steps away when a massive explosion, a brilliant flash of fragmented light, erupted on his right.

Bits of earth and splintered tree branches and shrubbery peppered his lower body along with the buckshot, a stinging rain of it like shrapnel from a burst hand grenade. The shock straightened him up for an instant; then, reflexively, he threw himself into the hollow, rolling, scrambling along wet earth into the bramble thicket.

The killer had been here all along, waiting at some vantage point in the bush; he hadn't wanted to leave a witness of any kind, and he had likely wanted to know who Flagg was, and those were the things that had kept him on the island. Flagg's heart thudded painfully against his ribs as he turned his body on the moist ground. His gun was gone, lost in the first shock of impact or in his wild dive for cover. The killer had the shotgun and the handgun he'd used on Parish and the dogs; Flagg had nothing now except the hunting knife sheathed at his belt.

He lifted his right hand and eased it downward. His torso was bloody, the knife was bloody, but he knew that the full force of the shotgun blast had missed him. He drew the knife, wiped the haft on his trouser leg, and gripped it tightly in his right hand, waiting.

He could hear the killer stalking him, coming in to end it.

Covered with mud, leaves, twigs, Flagg lay motionless so as not to betray his position. His only chance was that the guy would not be familiar with jungle-type fighting, that he would be overconfident after that first, almost point-blank shot. It was difficult to see anyone lying motionless in a pocket of darkness, and Flagg was counting on that, on the element of surprise.

The killer came out of the thick brush on the hillside, a few feet below where Flagg had stood at the moment the shotgun erupted. He was less than ten yards from where Flagg now lay. In his left hand he carried a leather briefcase, with a single-barrel shotgun crooked down in the elbow; in his right was a small automatic, held up and ready. His eyes ranged the brush. Flagg waited until the man's body was half-turned away from him, and then he raised up fluidly and threw the hunting knife.

The overhand pitch was hard and it was true, and the blade flashed through the darkness and disappeared into the killer's exposed right side just below the ribs. His body stiffened in a rigid pose. Flagg was already on his feet and rushing forward. He caught the haft of the knife just as the killer began to sag at the middle. The blade came free

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cleanly. The man turned, facing Flagg fully, their eyes only inches apart. There was a look of astonishment in the pain-washed glance, then dull emptiness. He fell into a small heap, staring sightlessly upward.

For the first time since the sprayed buckshot had struck his body, Flagg felt pain across his own right side, his stomach. The front of his black sweater was stained darkly with blood, and there was enough of it so that tiny streams flowed downward over his trousers, but he knew he wasn't badly hurt, that none of the wounds were deep. He would be able to patch himself up with strips of cloth until he could get to a safe doctor.

He knelt, hurting, pulled the dropped briefcase to him and opened the catches. There was a pencil flash in his utility belt, and he used that to examine the contents: Parish's notes, all right, and several pages of typescript for the projected book.

He put the flash on the dead man's face and body. He was tall and thin, like the other dead man in the caretaker's cottage. Flagg turned him slightly and went through his pockets. There was a wallet there and inside it a California driver's license issued to a Thomas Sanders; but the face that looked back at Flagg from the photograph was *not* the face of the killer.

Flagg returned the wallet to the dead man's pocket, stood up with the briefcase held in his right hand. He was thinking about the dogs, the two dead Dobermans lying twenty feet apart behind the caretaker's cottage; and he was thinking about how those dogs—and Eric Parish—had died of handgun wounds, while the man in the cottage had had his face blown away with a shotgun. It began to make sense for him then. A pair of trained Dobermans, like Parish, would not have allowed anyone near enough to them to fire a single bullet into each brain unless they knew that someone and trusted him—and the only other man on the island whom they would have known and trusted was Denman, the caretaker.

It was Denman, then, who lay dead at his feet.

The man in the cottage was a ringer, maybe an acquaintance of Denman's, maybe a drifter Denman had lured out to the island on some pretext or other; someone with the same general build as the island's caretaker, someone to be found without a face and carrying Denman's wallet. It had been a clumsy effort at best, but then men like Denman, taking one big gamble for the brass ring, weren't always rational.

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Flagg figured Denman had discovered what Parish was doing on this island, who he really was, and had learned also of the incriminating papers and notes which Parish had brought with him. Maybe he had believed he could sell them back to the Organization—or to the Government, if they were willing to make a cash offer. In any case, he had evolved his plan and had put it into operation on this night.

He had killed the dogs first, sometime earlier in the evening, maybe telling Parish that he was target-shooting to cover the sounds of the shots. Then he had lured the ringer out to the island and installed him in his cottage. Later, he had entered the mansion and the study, killed Parish, and then returned to the cottage and used the shotgun on the ringer. All nice and neat, he must have thought; an unexplainable, and therefore unsolvable, double murder on a lonely Northwest island; a case to baffle the police for years if they accepted the *prima facie* evidence that the second dead man was in fact the caretaker. Denman could have gone anywhere afterward, using the ringer's identification, to put the papers on the market to the highest bidder.

Flagg turned away from Denman, found the compressed-air gun where he'd first been struck by the buckshot, and tucked it away in his belt. Then he limped slowly to where he had secreted the skiff, and put the briefcase in the stern. He managed to drag the craft into the waters of the strait, to lower the outboard and get it started.

The police were going to be baffled, he knew. When the bodies were discovered, as they would be one of these days by some curious local, the police would *really* have a mystery on their hands, one that would very probably receive national attention and be written up in one of those true-crime magazines. But that wasn't Flagg's problem; he had done the job he came to do, and that was all that mattered.

He pointed the skiff's bow at Doebay and slipped away into the night.

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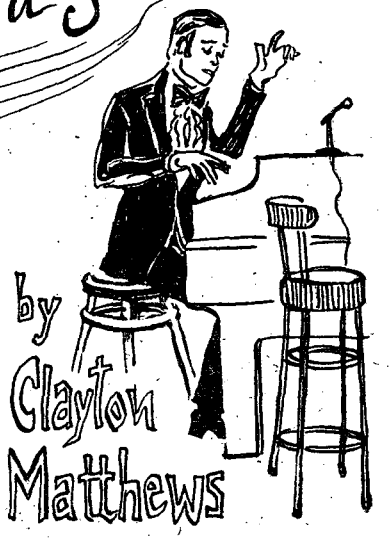
Even a modicum of talent can be deadly.

Elegy for a Songbird



by Clayton Matthews

THE LOUNGE held only about ten people at nine o'clock. Roger Cates rippled his long fingers lightly over the piano keys, a minimum of his attention required.

Behind him, through the wide expanse of window, the night lights of Greater Los Angeles glittered. It had rained earlier in the evening, sweeping the night clear of smog. The club was perched on a high bluff, the cocktail lounge jutting out into space.

"I beg your pardon?" Roger's head snapped around. "I guess I'm daydreaming tonight."

Of the five couples in the lounge, two sat at the piano bar. One of the women, blonde and fifty, said, "Play *Mood Indigo*, will you, Roger?" She fluttered a dollar bill into the brandy snifter on the piano.

"*Mood Indigo*. Just for you, Betty."

Roger automatically swung into the melody, but his attention was at

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that moment caught by a tall woman just entering the lounge. There was no rule against unescorted women, yet it was a rare event. The club was isolated, unadvertised, and patronized mainly by club members or by people familiar with Roger's playing and singing.

The woman came directly to the piano bar, taking the first seat on Roger's right, close by the microphone. She wore a flowered pants suit. Her face was rather long, framed by long black hair sweeping to her shoulders. Her complexion was pale, a thing uncommon in Southern California, her face without makeup except for the faintest touch of lipstick. The mouth, full, sensual, Roger found curiously exciting. Brilliant black eyes appraised him candidly before she turned to the short-skirted waitress at her elbow and ordered a stinger.

When her drink came, she took out a cigarette case, extracted a long cigarette and lit it, nostrils flaring delicately as she exhaled smoke. She took a sip of her drink.

Roger, fingers resting on the keyboard, said, "Anything you'd like to hear, miss?" There was no wedding ring on her finger.

She squinted through drifting smoke. "How about *Raindrops*?"

Roger played the opening bars of *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head*, then said, "Do you sing?"

"A little. I'm not very good." Her voice was low, husky.

He swung the mike around toward her. "Suppose we be the judge of that."

She stared at him hard for a moment, sipped at her drink again and cleared her throat. To his muted accompaniment, she began to sing, voice uncertain at first, but picking up volume and confidence halfway through the lyrics. Her voice was untrained, but good, with what Roger thought of as a smoky quality. Not in the same class as Irene, of course; but few were.

At the end of the song there was a small ripple of applause. She glanced around with a start, as though she had forgotten where she was. She smiled with shy pleasure. "I've never sung in—"

"In a place like this?" he finished.

"Do many women just walk in like this," she gestured vaguely, "and sing?"

"As many as I can con into it. It makes my job easier."

"Are any of them any good?"

"Not many. A few." Roger shrugged. "You are one of the few."

"Why . . . thank you."

Her name was Jean Forbes.

Roger began playing softly. Jean cocked her head for a moment, frowning with a puzzled expression. "I don't recognize that . . ."

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"Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair."

She shook her head. "I don't think I've ever heard it."

"I like all the old ones. I suppose that dates me a little."

"You don't look so old to me." She finished the stinger and, with the applause still ringing in her ears, her initial shyness had receded, and she took on a faint, perhaps unconscious, coquettish manner.

She sang a few more songs and Roger felt much older than his forty years as he listened, watching her warm to the applause and his attention.

He had been thirty-five the night Irene came into the lounge where he was appearing at the time. Then, just being with her had made him feel younger.

Jean confided that she had stopped in for only one drink before going home, but she stayed until Roger played and sang his theme song, *Good Night, Irene.*

She appeared again three nights later, a Saturday, and the crowd was much larger. She came in at ten o'clock and stayed until Roger finished. Her singing was more confident this time, the applause more generous.

When Roger drove his car out of the parking lot a short time later, he saw her standing under the entrance awning. It was raining hard. He drove up and opened the curb door. "Waiting for someone?"

She ran down to peer in. "Oh, Roger, it's you! I'm waiting for a cab."

Roger hesitated only briefly before saying, "Hop in, I'll drive you home."

She lived in Hollywood. On the way they talked of music for the most part. Jean had wanted to become a professional singer, that was her original reason for coming to Hollywood, but it hadn't worked out. "The competition was just too stiff. I tried it for over a year, got a few paltry singing jobs, then gave it up as a lost cause."

"You gave it up after only a year?" Roger was incredulous.

"Sure, I realized I might be old and gray before I made it, if ever. Just a few weeks ago I was offered this gig as soloist with a band on tour, but I turned it down."

"You turned down a singing job?"

Something in his voice made her laugh uncertainly. "Sure, I've got this good job now, secretary in a large investment firm. I would have had to give that up—and for what? The tour was for only six months."

Roger said nothing, staring straight ahead at the driving rain.

Jean rode for a few blocks in silence, but she was soon chatting

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away again. She had been married once, divorced now for over a year.

Talking of her marriage, she became bitter. "I loved Bart, but he was no good. He drank too much and was jealous, possessive. He would get drunk and beat me for no reason at all. Once I was in the hospital for a week. That was when I decided I'd had enough."

Roger said nothing to any of this.

Two blocks from her place, Jean said, "You don't talk much about yourself, Roger. Have you ever been married?"

"No."

Undeterred by his curtness, she said lightly, "Not even in love, not ever?"

"Once."

She lived in a court, the last one in back on an alley, and she instructed him to drive down the alley. "It's easier that way."

It was late now, all the courts dark.

She turned toward him, her face a blur in the dimness. "Roger . . . I know it's late, but would you like to come in for a drink? Or a cup of coffee?"

Since he seldom got home much before two, Roger always slept late. The police woke him a little after eight the next morning. Roger, yawning, came to the door of his bachelor apartment, not even bothering to put on a robe over his pajamas.

There were two of them, in dark suits, about the same size and age, with neutral faces and hard eyes. They introduced themselves and showed their card cases. They asked politely if they could come in. They had some questions.

Roger stepped back and let them in. He yawned again before saying, "Questions about what?"

"Do you know a Jean Forbes, Mr. Gates?"

"Jean Forbes? No . . ." Roger started to shake his head, then paused. "Yes, of course, I know her."

"You admit knowing her?"

"If she's the one who came to the club a couple of times, yes, I know her." He frowned. "Why? What's this all about?"

"You drove her home from the club last night?"

"Well, yes . . . She was waiting for a cab and it was raining. Yes, I drove her home." His glance was puzzled, a touch truculent. "You still haven't told me what this is all about."

"You drove her home, then went in with her, for a nightcap, maybe?"

"I did not," Roger said emphatically. "She asked me but I left her at the door."

"You didn't go in?"

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"No, I did not go in, Officer."

"Can you prove that?"

"No, I suppose not. On the other hand, can you prove I did?"

This didn't rout the two officers, but it blunted their driving edge. "Jean Forbes was found murdered in her court apartment this morning. She had been strangled, her killer used a venetian blind cord. She died early this morning, sometime between two and three o'clock."

Roger whistled softly. "I see. Then that's why . . ." He shook his head. "Lord, I am sorry. I didn't know her all that well, but still . . ."

They agreed that it was a shocking thing, if that was what he had started to say. They asked a few more routine questions, the steam gone out of them then, before departing.

Roger turned away from the door, again yawning. He was still sleepy. He hoped he had seen the last of the police, yet he knew he hadn't.

Two different officers came for him shortly before noon. This time he was told he was wanted downtown for questioning. He was driven downtown and escorted to an interrogation room in the police department. The room was painted an institutional gray, with a table and three straight-back chairs, and a single, hooded lamp dangling low over the table.

They left him alone for almost an hour. Roger sat, smoking one cigarette after another. He sat facing the door. Sure he was under observation, he tried to appear relaxed, yet from time to time he caught himself leaning toward the door, tension coiling in him. He didn't know if the door were locked, and it took all his willpower not to step over and see.

Finally it opened, and two men came in, both in plainclothes. One was tall, well over six feet, the other just making the height requirements.

It was the short one who did most of the questioning. His long face was pitted, as though from a childhood bout with smallpox, and it gave him a sinister look. Yet he was patient, polite, his voice so soft Roger sometimes had to strain to hear. He sat across the table from Roger. He pulled the light down until it shone mostly on Roger, his own face blurred in shadow. The other officer leaned against the wall directly behind Roger, smoking quietly.

"My name is Owen Harter, Mr. Cates. We have a few questions."

"I thought I answered all the questions for the other officers."

"Not quite all. We need to go back a little, about eighteen months

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ago, in fact. You see, we always look into the background of people involved in a homicide. We did that in your case, and we found Irene Webb."

Roger said tightly, "I was cleared of that."

"Yes. Yes, you were," the soft voice said. "But her killer was never found. And she used to come in to sing at the piano bar where you worked at the time. In police work, we are always suspicious of coincidences. Of course, the Webb girl was killed with a knife, the girl last night was strangled."

"There is another difference—I was in love with Irene, we were going to be married."

"There *is* that, but then you must admit that the similarities do raise some questions."

"All that I see is that I'm being hounded because I once was—" Realizing that he was shouting, Roger lowered his voice. "Am I going to have to live with that for the rest of my life?"

"I'm afraid so, if you are in any way involved in a homicide."

"I don't know what else I can say," Roger said resignedly, "to convince you that I didn't kill Jean."

There was a sudden movement behind him, and the second officer stepped up to place a rough hand on Roger's shoulder, forcing him back against the chair. "You can tell us the truth!" he said in a hard voice. He leaned down close. "You went into that house last night, didn't you? You tried something, she resisted and you killed her! Isn't that the way it was, Cates?"

"No, sir, it is not," Roger said steadily.

The hard fingers dug in. "You're lying!"

Harter leaned forward, scarred face swimming into the light. The soft voice said, "Now, Jack, we don't know that Mr. Cates is lying, do we? Of course, if he is, it will go much easier for him if he tells the truth now. Jean Forbes wasn't raped, we know that. Were you frightened off, Mr. Cates? Or did you kill her for another reason? You can tell *me*, Mr. Cates, I'm your friend here."

Roger's glance skipped from one to the other. Then he laughed harshly. "The good-guy, bad-guy routine, huh? You'll get nowhere that way. I've been through that bit before."

There were a few more questions after that. Finally Harter said wearily, "Okay, Cates, you can go now. Just don't leave town suddenly."

"I'm not going anywhere. I have no reason to."

Roger had been playing in a little bar in Santa Monica, only a block

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from the beach, when he met Irene. Slim, golden, a green-eyed goddess right out of an erotic dream, she had come in late one night with a man whose name Roger never learned.

Both were a little high, and Irene was singing into the mike before her first drink was served. Her voice was as golden as the rest of her, with a "lilt of Irish laughter." Roger learned later that she'd had some voice training and had cut a few records that were a modest success. She had been offered several singing jobs, but had turned them all down. To be a success as a singer was too arduous, demanding too much of her. "I'm having too much fun to go through that gig."

This was something Roger couldn't understand. He had always wanted to be a singer. He had struggled toward that goal, sacrificing everything, surmounting one disappointment after another until one day a shrewd talent manager told him, "You've got a pleasant enough voice, Cates. And it's true many singers make it big with a worse talent than yours, but they have the funky sound to make it big today. Or a gimmick. This is the age of the gimmick singers. Find a gimmick and you just *might* have a chance."

Roger couldn't find the right gimmick and had to continue eking out a living as a lounge entertainer. So he couldn't understand anyone fortunate enough to have the necessary talent *and* the opportunity, refusing to take advantage. By the time he had learned this much about Irene, however, it didn't really matter. He was in love with her.

A week passed after that first night, and he didn't expect to see her again. Then she came back—alone, and sober. She sang a dozen songs and was a big hit in the small lounge. She seemed totally unimpressed by the applause and flattering words. She said later, "What does it really mean? A pack of barhounds, smashed and sob-sistery over a few sentimental songs."

She stayed until the lounge closed. She seemed to take it for granted that Roger knew she was waiting for him.

They walked along the deserted beach. It was late fall, long after midnight, and the fog hung like ectoplasm around them.

Irene hugged his arm against her side and shivered. "I love the fog. It's my Gaelic blood, I suspect."

He turned, took her into his arms. Her mouth was soft, with a tart flavor, her body pliant in his embrace, and he loved her very much.

"I love you, Irene."

"That's nice. I think I like that."

She was a creature of many

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moods, alternating between gloomy and gay, highly independent of spirit and quick to anger. At times there was a wanton quality about her that troubled Roger.

She made a habit of dropping in two or three nights a week, and afterward they would walk along the beach if it weren't raining, sometimes attending a movie or a play, sometimes not. Irene had a little sports car, and she liked to drive it fast, hair whipping in the wind, eyes wild.

A plan gradually took shape in Roger's mind. Actually there were two plans, both part of the whole. He made a few inquiries, and received encouraging responses.

It was raining hard the night he was ready to broach it to Irene. It was late when she came in, and she had been drinking. He wanted to go someplace where they could talk quietly, but she insisted they walk on the beach. He finally gave in. Since meeting her, he had taken to keeping a raincoat in the bar, and she was wearing one when she arrived. Although late in the year, it wasn't too cold, the rain was unseasonably warm, and they walked along the beach barefoot.

The rain slanted down, wind-driven, and Roger found it very difficult to talk, but it had been building up, a pressure not to be denied, and it all came spilling out.

"Irene, I've asked around. A couple of places are interested in us cutting a record—you singing, me on the piano. And I found a club, a top club, willing to give us a tryout, the same setup, you singing, me on the keys. Within a year we could be on top, making big money."

She said something, but the wind and the rain tore her words away.

In his urgency Roger seized her by the arm and pulled her to a halt. "What did you say?"

"I said, who needs that scene? I told you before, I'm not interested."

"But all that talent going to waste! And this is a chance that doesn't come to many people."

"It's my talent. Roger, it's cut-throat up there."

"I'll be there to back you up."

"For a while maybe. But the best of teams break up sooner or later."

"You don't understand!" He shook her hard. "This is for keeps. We'd be man and wife. I'm asking you to marry me, Irene!"

"Marry you!"

At first he thought she was crying. He peered closely at her. She was laughing! "What's so funny?"

"You are! You have to be out of your gourd! A piano player with very little talent, doomed to mediocrity . . . You think I'd marry *you*?"

His mind groped toward some measure of understanding. "But I

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told you I loved you! You've been going out with me . . ."

She shrugged. "It was fun, something to pass the time. Now it isn't fun anymore."

His fingers bit into her arm. "You can't mean that!"

"Oh, but I do mean it. You're hurting my arm!" She wrenched free of his grasp. "This is the finish. I won't be seeing you again, Roger."

He stood, unmoving, as she walked away from him. Within fifty yards she was swallowed up by the rain and the dark.

She was found on the beach the next day, a knife driven into her ribs just below the heart. She was still barefoot. The rain had washed away any possible footprints in the sand near her body, and the knife was never identified. There were no clues of any kind.

Roger was questioned exhaustively. It was a well-known fact that he had been seeing her, and he didn't deny being the last one to see her alive, with the possible exception of the killer. Fortunately for him it was eventually discovered that Irene had been seeing at least two other men, both possessively jealous, and had quarreled with both of them before witnesses; and no motive could be ascribed to Roger.

The investigation uncovered the fact that there had been tentative plans for Irene and Roger to cut a record, and there was the job offer from a reputable nightclub. Still, there wasn't enough evidence to indict Roger—or either of the other two men, for that matter. In the end the case was marked unsolved, and the investigation dwindled away.

Roger wasn't questioned again about Jean's death, which surprised him a little. With Irene he had been questioned almost every day for weeks. Then, two days after Jean's body was found, he read the explanation in the paper. Jean's ex-husband had been charged with her murder. According to the newspaper story, he had never really accepted the divorce. On several occasions, when drunk, he had bothered her at work and had threatened her life. Just a week before her death he had appeared at her door, again to make drunken threats; and on the night she was killed, he had no alibi, had been bar-hopping, with only vague recollections of where he had been.

Roger had one more visit from the police, the soft-spoken Owen Harter who had questioned him at the police building. Harter had with him a blown-up picture of Jean's ex-husband. "Did you ever see this man? Did he ever come

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into the bar where you work?"

Roger examined the picture carefully before saying, "No, I've never seen this man before in my life."

"You're sure, now?"

"I'm positive."

Harter sighed softly and put the picture away. He studied Roger curiously for a moment. "Well, we've indicted him. I doubt we'll ever convict him. I'm far from satisfied, but I'm outvoted. If I only had more time, I'm convinced I could—" He broke off, head canted to one side. "One rather curious thing I did find out in my poking around, however. It seems that you've made several demonstration records in the past. None caught on. Then, after a hiatus of over a year, you made another—one more disaster."

"All right, so I don't have what it takes to make it big," Roger said tightly. "I don't see why that should interest you."

"Maybe it shouldn't, I don't know. But it does strike me as curious that you just got word that there was no interest in the last one the very day Jean Forbes was killed. My superiors think it means nothing. Maybe they're right. Who can say?" He started out. "So long, Cates. Not good-bye. I have a strong hunch we'll be seeing each other again, one of these days."

Roger went back to work. The police had questioned the club employees and the regular customers, but no suspicions had been voiced about Roger, so his job wasn't in jeopardy.

The storm that had moved into the city three days ago still lingered on, erupting into intermittent showers; and the club wasn't crowded all evening.

Around ten Roger glanced up and saw a strange girl sliding onto the stool nearest the microphone. She was a redhead, very attractive, and well under thirty. Her gray eyes regarded Roger with bold curiosity.

"Hello," Roger said.

"Hi," she said brightly.

Softly, Roger began playing *Laura,* humming a few bars under his breath. Then he said, "Do you sing, Laura?"

"Well . . . I like to think so. But probably not very well."

"Suppose I be the judge of that." He bent the microphone around to her. "What song would you like, Laura, and in what key do you sing?"

Roger could only hope that her voice would be terrible.

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With a little time, and enough incentive, one may fall into a most gratifying niche.

The Last REVIVAL

COY SLIPPED OFF the side of the empty boxcar an hour after the slow-moving freight train crossed the Arkansas state line. He slid down the cinder-covered embankment to the gully beside the tracks and waited there, hiding in the bushes, until the rest of the train lumbered by and the caboose was well down the tracks. Then he climbed back up the hill and looked around.

In three directions Coy saw nothing but wide vistas of evenly furrowed farmland, broken now and again by a fence or a house, or a stand of trees. In the fourth direction his scrutiny was rewarded by the sight of a blacktop secondary

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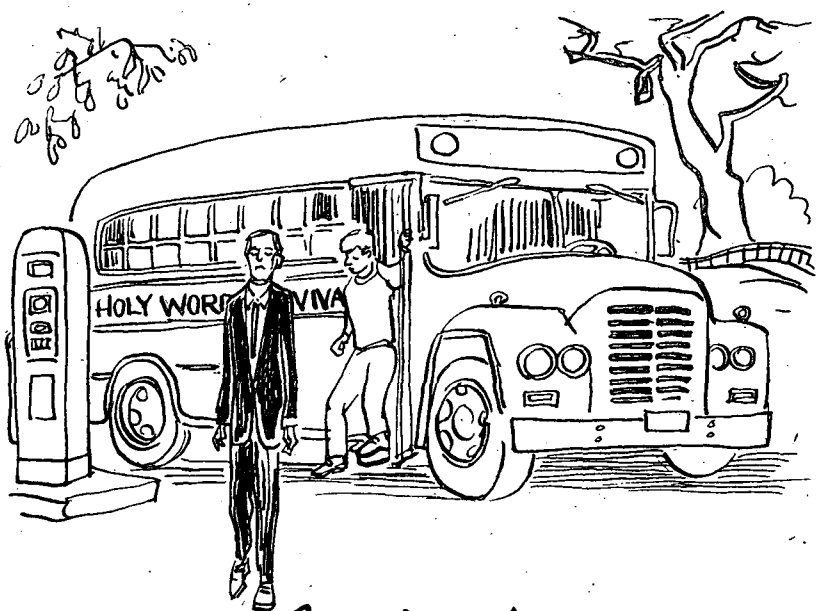
road running perpendicular to the railroad tracks. About half a mile down the road, Coy saw what looked like a small service station. Thinking he might be able to get some food there, he started toward the place. As he walked, his stomach growled furiously.

Coy's last meal had been supper the previous night, five hours before he had dug under the road-gang fence back in Mississippi and headed for the Arkansas line. It was close to one o'clock now, judging from the slant of his shadow, which meant he had been without food for close to twenty hours. He had two dollars and sixty cents left and he wanted to keep as much of it as possible. In Arkansas it took a minimum of a dollar to keep from being a vagrant, but he was going to have to get something to eat soon or he knew he was going to be sick.

It turned out that the service station was also a country grocery store. After looking around inside, Coy finally invested fifty-eight cents in a can of Vienna sausages, a package of crackers, and a cold bottle of



by Clark Howard

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orange pop. He had the storekeeper open the can for him and took his food outside where he sat on an empty box to eat. He was sitting there eating when the Revival Bus pulled in for gas a few minutes later and he saw the girl for the first time.

Maybe it was her hair, dark cherry-colored and long, very finely textured, or the wide shoulders that tapered to a waist so trim it seemed incapable of holding her together—or maybe it was the way her uncolored lips parted as she paused for a moment on the raised steps of the bus. Maybe, he told himself, it was just that she was the first woman he had seen up close after seven months of abstinence in the Squires County Prison Camp over in Mississippi. Whatever it was that passed between them when their eyes met and locked for that split instant, one thing was for certain: it was electric and it was mutual. Coy was sure she felt it just as much as he did.

She stepped quickly down and went around to the side toward the rest rooms. When she was out of sight, Coy turned his attention to the bus itself. It had seen better days, that was obvious. Coy guessed it was a reconditioned school bus. Through the windows he could see that the rear half of it had been converted into living quarters of some kind. Across the side under the row of windows were painted the words: HOLY WORD REVIVAL.

Two men got off while Coy was watching. One of them was a cold-eyed, bitter-faced man, tall and lean as a stick. Despite the heat of the day, he was wearing a black suit and a string tie knotted at the throat. He walked stiffly erect, glancing neither left nor right.

The second man who got off was smaller and crippled. His left foot was clubbed and he wore a high-laced leather shoe with an enormous heel. Understandably awkward in his gait, he labored along behind the taller man.

After the men had gone inside the store, Coy finished eating and went around to the side of the building where the girl had gone. From his shirt pocket he took out one of two cigarettes that were left in a crumpled pack. He dug his thumbnail into the head of a wooden match and lighted up. He had just thrown the match away and was lounging against an empty oil drum when the girl came back out. Her face was flushed, as if she had just finished splashing cold water on it. She glanced briefly at Coy and started back toward the front of the store.

"Hey," he greeted her quietly as she walked past him.

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"Hey, yourself," she answered back. She almost paused, then seemed to think better of it. After half a step's hesitation, she kept going.

"Hold on a minute, will you?" Coy said, catching her by the arm. "You're riding that revival bus out there, aren't you?"

"You saw me get off it, didn't you?" she replied. She made no move to take his hand off her arm.

"You reckon I could get a lift to the next town?"

"Not a chance," she said emphatically. "Brother Monroe, he's the preacher, never picks up hitchhikers." She looked down at his hand. "You through with my arm?"

Coy let go and she started to walk away. Before she had gone two steps, she turned back again.

"If you'll give me a puff of that cigarette, I'll tell you how you *might* be able to get yourself a ride," she said.

Coy nodded and held the cigarette up. The girl glanced apprehensively toward the front of the store, then stepped quickly over to him and took a long, deep drag. She stood very close to him, touching his wrist lightly with her fingertips. There was a slight fragrance about her that he found pleasant as she stood there. He saw that she had freckles down the front of her dress where it was unbuttoned at the top.

"That sure tasted good," she said after she exhaled. She swayed slightly. "Wow! When you haven't had a smoke for a week, it really hits you."

Coy took her arm again to steady her. She leaned toward him, smiling almost giddily.

"What about that ride?" he said.

"Okay, listen. You go out and offer to drive the bus for Brother Monroe. You know how to drive, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Good. Brother Monroe doesn't like to drive, says it bothers his back. The other one, Aaron Timm, with the clubfoot, has been doing the driving, but the state troopers fined Brother Monroe for it yesterday outside Little Rock. They said Aaron shouldn't be handling a bus in his condition. So, if you say you'll do all the driving, Brother Monroe just might let you come along."

They both heard the store's screen door slam and the girl quickly pulled away from Coy.

"I've got to go." She hurried back around front.

Coy took another drag on the cigarette, thinking that her lips had just been on it, thinking of the way she smelled and of the freckles that disappeared under the top of her dress. Smiling to himself, he tossed the butt away and walked around to the bus.

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The girl was already on board, sitting by one of the open windows. Aaron Timm was waiting at the bus door while Brother Monroe counted out a handful of change to pay for the gas.

"'Scuse me, Reverend," Coy said when the preacher was finished. "I was wondering if you could let me have a ride into the next town?"

"Don't take hitchhikers," Brother Monroe said gruffly.

"I'd offer to pay if I had any money, sir," Coy said politely. "Sure be glad to work it out, though. I could help with the driving or whatever else there was to do."

"Might not be a bad idea, Brother Monroe," said Aaron Timm. "Them troopers could have sent word ahead to watch for us."

"They might put us in jail next time, Brother Monroe," the girl added from the window.

"Shut up, both of you!" the preacher snapped. "I don't need the likes of you two to do my thinking for me!" He looked Coy up and down. "You a good driver? Careful?"

"Yes, sir," Coy said solemnly.

"All right, get behind the wheel," Monroe ordered. "I'll try you for a mile or two."

"Thank you kindly, Reverend," Coy said. As Brother Monroe turned to board the bus, Coy smiled up at the girl. She smiled back and winked.

The broad, flat farmlands sped by as Coy guided the bus smoothly along the blacktop. In the rear-view mirror he could see Aaron Timm curled up asleep on one of the double seats. Brother Monroe, after sitting up front and watching him drive for all of two minutes, had retired to the rear of the bus and drawn the heavy curtain that partitioned off his private quarters. The girl had moved over to a seat on the aisle and propped her knees up on the seat in front of her to read a dog-eared movie magazine. Sitting the way she was gave Coy a good view of her legs. For a while he divided his time between watching the road and watching her. After a few miles, the girl's eyes closed and she leaned over in the seat to doze, and Coy could no longer see her.

When there was nothing else on the bus to occupy his mind, Coy fished out the last of his cigarettes and smoked while he drove. He thought of Gaston, the town they were heading for. Roscoe was in Gaston—at least he had been a week ago. Coy had found that out from a new arrival on the road gang who had worked as a cleanup man in the Gaston Pool Parlor for a few days and then had wandered across

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the state line to Lill, Mississippi, where he had taken a fall for petty theft. He had been given a ninety-day sentence and had arrived at the Squires County Prison Camp that same afternoon. It was two days later that Coy heard him mention a man named Roscoe who was dealing cards in the back room of the Gaston Pool Parlor.

Coy wondered who Roscoe was using for a straight man now. *Probably another poor sucker like I was a year ago,* he thought. His mind drifted back to the day Roscoe had found him in a cheap Alabama cafe where Coy had been washing dishes for four dollars a day and meals. Roscoe had liked his looks and had taken him out of the joint and taught him how to be a straight man in a poker game. It wasn't really cheating, Roscoe had explained. All a straight man did was help build up the pot whenever his partner gave the high sign that he was taking less than three cards on a draw. It was supposed to be a simple matter of percentages, that was all—nothing crooked about it—except that Roscoe was tilting the odds to about ninety percent in his favor by using marked cards. Then, one night he had left Coy holding the proverbial bag in a roadhouse in Squires County.

Coy flipped his cigarette out the vent window and rubbed the scar that cut an arc around his jawbone. That was from a beer bottle one of the players had broken across his face before they dragged him off to jail. The roadhouse owner who had been running the game was a cousin of the county magistrate, so to console his players who had lost part of their cotton-crop profits, he arranged with the magistrate for Coy to draw a one-year sentence.

On the road gang the men dug irrigation ditches twelve hours a day. Coy got used to it after a few weeks, after his blisters had swollen, broken, bled, and then hardened into calluses; after his shoulders ached some more, then loosened into workable, elastic muscles; and after his stomach stopped revolting against the watery grits and lumpy oatmeal that Squires County fed its convicts. He got used to it, and determined to see it through. A year, the magistrate had said when he railroaded him, so a year Coy would do.

He would have, too, if he hadn't heard where Roscoe was—but thinking about Roscoe had been too much for him. Roscoe wearing fancy silk shirts while Coy wore striped sackcloth; Roscoe eating steak and eggs while Coy ate slop; Roscoe sleeping on a feather mattress in an air-conditioned motel room while Coy spent his nights on a wooden bunk in a sweltering

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prison barracks. Thinking about all that was just too much. The work grew unbearable, the food became intolerable again, and the nights were dark periods of torture in which Roscoe's smiling face was ever in his mind.

Coy could not take it, so he dug out. At ten o'clock one night he made it through a loose floorboard in the barracks and dug under the barbed-wire fence. He headed west, toward the nearest state line. He walked for nine hours, and at seven o'clock the next morning stole a pair of overalls and a work shirt off some farmer's wash line. After changing clothes, he made it to the nearest highway and got a ride on a vegetable truck. Three towns down the road he earned three dollars unloading the truck at the produce cannery. He bought a pack of cigarettes and immediately hopped a freight out of town. He rode the freight until an hour after it crossed the Arkansas line. Then he rolled off and walked down to the gas station where the Revival Bus had pulled in.

Now, Coy told himself as he drove, he had two things to accomplish: getting even with Roscoe—and getting away. If they caught him and sent him back to Mississippi, he'd get an additional sentence for his escape: twice the time he'd had left to serve, plus a year. That would be twenty-two months instead of the five he'd had left.

Coy smiled grimly. It was worth taking the chance. Catching up with Roscoe would *make* it worth taking the chance.

He leaned over the wheel and hunched his back to relax. He wished he had another cigarette, but it wouldn't be long now. Up ahead a sign read: GASTON 12.

On a large vacant field just outside the Gaston city limits, Coy took off his shirt and helped Aaron Timm unload the bus. The revival meeting tent, which was tied to the cargo carrier on top, was the first to come off. Then they took down the stacks of folding chairs and a collapsible pulpit which had been carried beneath the folded tent. Last came a small pedal organ that was lashed to the rear luggage rack.

"When do you set everything up?" Coy asked when it was all unloaded and piled in a neat row.

"In the morning," Aaron said, chewing on a toothpick. "I'll raise the tent and set up all the chairs and things right after breakfast. Then in the afternoon I go into town and pass out them handbills over there." He pointed to a cardboard box filled with printed circulars. "The meeting'll be tomorrow evening after the supper hour. Brother Monroe, he'll preach a ser-

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mon and play the organ. The girl there, she'll sing hymns. I'll pass the collection plate afterward."

Coy nodded. He glanced over and saw the girl opening up a box of pots and pans next to a portable cookstove she had just set up. The preacher was slumped down in a camp chair under a tree with his eyes closed.

"He sure don't overwork himself, does he?"

"Why should he?" replied Aaron, momentarily angry. "Why should he, when he's got fools like me and the girl to do everything?"

"If you don't like it, why don't you quit?" Coy said. He kept his tone conversational.

"And do what?" Aaron asked with a grunt. "Jobs ain't easy to come by when you got a clubfoot and don't know how to do nothing. And I don't know how to do nothing." His anger passed quickly and he rubbed his hand fondly over the smooth-finished top of the pedal organ. "Except play the organ, that is. I do that real good."

"Thought you said the preacher did the organ-playing."

"He does. But I could, if he'd let me. Play a lot better'n he does, too."

"Why won't he let you?" Coy asked.

Aaron Timm looked down at the ground, embarrassed. "He thinks we make more money when I pass the collection plate. Says people are apt to drop in a little extra when they see me dragging my clubfoot along."

Coy nodded and did not pursue the subject. "Anything else I can help you with?" he asked.

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"I have to unfold the tent now and spread it out so's it'll be ready to hoist in the morning," Aaron said. "You can lend me a hand with that if you want."

"Sure."

While they worked the big, heavy tent, Coy watched the girl putting canned stew into a cook pot and lighting a fire under it. Her back was to him and when she moved he could see ripples where her leg muscles flexed and loosened. He always had admired a woman with good, strong legs.

"What's her name?" he asked Aaron, bobbing his head toward the girl.

"Willow," said Aaron. "Don't know her last name."

"Where'd she come from?"

"Monroe picked her up a few weeks back when he was in southern Indiana. I think she's a runaway." Aaron chuckled. "Old Monroe, he had it in mind for her to share the back of the bus with him. He ain't had much luck with her, though—she still goes off and sleeps outside by herself."

Coy looked over at Brother Monroe sprawled in the camp chair. "He sure don't fit my idea of a preacher."

"He ain't," Aaron said, grunting again. "Ain't no more a preacher than you are. He just knows how to talk good, is all. Why, when he's behind that pulpit threatening brimstone and eternal damnation, he's as good as any preacher you ever seen, but that's when he's getting ready, to pass the plate. After it's over, when all the farmers and their families have gone on home, then he's back to the jug again and thinking about that girl Willow—"

"Likes his liquor, does he," Coy said, more of a statement than a question.

"You bet your boots he does," Aaron told him emphatically. "He'll have me running all over town tomorrow looking for a bootlegger to buy a jug from. This here state's dry, you know—can't sell hard liquor over the counter in Arkansas."

"Yeah, I know." *So old hatchet-face is a big fraud,* Coy mused. *Just a good talker . . .*

They finished laying out the tent and went back over to the bus where Coy had hung his shirt.

"Well, I guess I'll be on my way," Coy said. He noticed a pained look come over Aaron's face, as if the little man did not want to see him go.

"If you'll stick around," he said, "I'll see if I can sneak you a bowl of that stew Willow's making."

"Maybe I'll see you later," Coy told him. "Right now I want to go into Gaston."

"Sure," Aaron said, a little down-

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heartedly. "Well, thanks for lending me a hand."

Coy walked on around the bus. When he was out of sight, he paused for a second to steal several of Brother Monroe's handbills from the box he had seen earlier. Then he crossed the field to the highway and started walking into Gaston.

The back room of the Gaston Pool Parlor was filled with the thick closeness of sweat and smoke. A dozen men in overalls and scuffed work shoes stood watching the poker game that was being played on an oilcloth-covered table under a low-hanging light. There were five players in the game, two of them farmers and two others who looked like poolroom bums. The fifth man was Roscoe.

Coy stood well back in the group of spectators, in the shadows so that Roscoe could not see him. Unlike the other onlookers, he was not watching the game itself, not following the cards and bets and raises. He was just watching Roscoe, watching his face and eyes, thinking about how many good meals Roscoe had eaten in the last seven months; how many nights Roscoe had crawled between clean sheets; how many hot baths Roscoe had taken. Unconsciously, as he thought about those things, Coy reached up and rubbed a fingertip along the scar where the beer bottle had broken across his cheek.

Enjoy the game, gambling man, he thought. *It's the last one you'll be dealing for a long time.*

Coy edged behind the watching men to the back door and slipped out into the alley. He took Brother Monroe's handbills out of his shirt and put them under a trash barrel where he could easily find them again. Then he walked down the alley to the street. It was dark out now and he had to stand under a street light to count his money. He had a dollar bill, a dollar in change, and two cents left over. Taking the two cents out, he wrapped the rest of the money in the empty cigarette package he still had in his shirt pocket. Whistling softly, he walked across the town square and found an all-night cafe with a taxi parked in front of it. The driver was resting his head back against the seat, smoking.

"Evening," Coy said, leaning with one hand on the car roof.

"Evening," the driver replied. He studied Coy thoughtfully.

"Warm tonight," Coy observed.

"A mite," the driver allowed, "for this time of year."

Coy looked back at the square. "Right nice little town you got here."

"Stranger, are you?"

Coy nodded. "Just passing

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through. Camped 'bout a mile up the highway." He smiled. "Kind of hard on a man in a strange town, not knowing anybody at all. Man don't even know where to buy a jug."

"Can't buy a jug in this state," the driver said. "This here is a dry state."

"Sure," said Coy, "I know about the liquor laws. Know a little about the taxi business, too."

"That so?" The driver's tone was carefully neutral.

"Sure. Used to drive one myself up in Junction City, Kansas. It was dry up there, too, but what we'd do was tell a thirsty man to leave two dollars somewhere—" Coy looked around and then nodded toward a stack of empty cola cases at the side of the cafe. "Like in that top crate over there. Then we'd tell him to take a walk around the square. Sure enough, when he got back, his two dollars would be gone and there'd be a two-dollar jug of homemade mash there instead."

"That's right interesting," the driver observed.

"Well, one thing about it," Coy said, "there wasn't no way for the man doing the selling to get caught." He took his hand off the top of the car and stretched. "Well, it's getting late. I reckon I'll walk once around town and then head back out the highway. See you."

The taxi driver nodded. Coy stepped back onto the sidewalk and sauntered over to the stack of cola cases. He put one foot up on the empty boxes to retie his shoelace, and as he did he slipped the cigarette package of money into the top crate. Then he started around the square, whistling softly again.

When Coy got back to the cafe, the taxi was gone and so was his money, and a corked, unmarked quart bottle of bootleg whiskey was in the top crate. Coy slipped the bottle under his shirt and strolled back to the alley behind the poolroom. He set the bottle on the ground behind the trash barrel where he had put Brother Monroe's handbills. Then he sat down across the alley near the back door of the poolroom and leaned up against somebody's fence. He relaxed and looked up at the starry sky.

Waiting there in the dark, Coy thought about the girl, Willow, and how she had touched his hand when she shared his cigarette back at the gas station. He thought about how she had stood close to him and how the sunlight had fallen on the freckles that spread down inside her dress . . .

Closing his eyes, Coy smiled and wondered if she had freckles all over.

Roscoe came out of the poolroom

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at midnight looking as cool and detached as ever.

Coy's eyes snapped open at once at the sound of the door opening. He tensed and remained perfectly still, looking up from where he was sitting as Roscoe stood in a rectangle of light and slipped the knot of his tie up to the buttoned collar of his silk shirt. After putting on his coat, Roscoe cracked two of his knuckles, stared at the clear night sky for a moment, then stepped into the alley, closing the door behind him. Coy waited until Roscoe walked past him, then he stood up.

"Hello, gambling man," he said softly.

Roscoe whirled around and met Coy's fist, thrown at him with seven months of road-gang strength. It struck him solidly in the mouth, splitting both lips and driving his front teeth inward. Before he could even moan he was struck again, flush in the center of the face, the impact laying waste to the cartilage and bone of his nose. Blows began to rain down on him, ripping his cheek, tearing his ear, fracturing his jawbone. They were hard-knuckled blows that beat a methodical tattoo of pain that quickly began to blacken his consciousness. He slumped against a building as explosions of red flashed under his closed eyelids. Instinctively he raised his arms and sought to shelter his face behind them, but when he did so, he felt his rib cage rocked by the same incessant pounding until momentarily the breath in his lungs deserted him and he choked for air. A final vicious blow dug deeply into his soft stomach and he doubled up and pitched onto his face in the dirt of the alley.

Coy stood over him, his chest heaving, fists aching, upper arms searing with exertion. *For the seven months, gambling man,* he thought coldly, *and for the scar on my face.*

Rolling Roscoe onto his back, Coy took the billfold from his inside coat pocket and a half-filled package of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. Then he got the revival handbills from under the nearby trash barrel and spread them loosely under Roscoe's limp arm.

Retrieving the quart of whiskey from where he had put it, Coy left the alley and headed out the dark highway. Half a mile outside of town, he left the road and cut over to a stream he had seen earlier. He stretched out on his stomach and soaked both of his hands in the cold, soothing water. When he was sure neither hand was going to swell up, he dried his hands on his shirttail and went back to the highway.

Brother Monroe was still awake when Coy got back to the camp. He was sitting on his cot in the

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back of the bus. The blue light of an oil lantern cast heavy shadows around him.

"Reverend," Coy said quietly.

Monroe jumped, startled. "What—who's there?" Then he saw who it was. "What are you doing prowling around here, boy?" he bristled. "What do you want?"

"Didn't aim to disturb you, sir," Coy said. "There's something I need your advice about."

"You must be crazy, boy," Monroe snorted. "It's the middle of the night. Now you get on out of here—"

"But I just wanted to know what to do with this," Coy said, taking the bottle of whiskey from under his shirt and holding it so that Monroe could get a good look at it. The hard-eyed old man leaned forward and peered at the bottle. His tongue wet his lips. "The man that owns the poolroom gave it to me for sweeping out his place," Coy said innocently. "It's hard liquor and I don't know what to do with it. Liquor's sinful, ain't it, Reverend?"

"Eh?" Monroe said, his eyes never leaving the bottle. "Sinful? Oh, yes! Yes, indeed, it certainly is sinful."

"I didn't want to throw it away anywhere for fear somebody'd find it and drink it," Coy declared. "And I didn't want to pour it out because it ain't fit to pour on good soil. So I thought I'd ask you about it, sir."

"Best thing you could have done, boy," Monroe said with growing enthusiasm.

"I was thinking maybe you could use it at the revival meeting tomorrow night," Coy said. "Kind of an example against sinful ways. You could just smash it right in front of everybody to show folks how easy it is to put the devil behind them."

"An inspirational idea, my boy!" Monroe beamed. "Might help some poor soul see the light of salvation. I'll do that very thing. Give me the bottle."

Coy handed it to him. Monroe placed it gently on the cot, then got up and put a fatherly hand on Coy's shoulder. He guided him back through the bus to the door.

"You did a good Christian act tonight, my boy, and I'm sure you'll be amply rewarded for it in the Hereafter. I'll ask you to leave me to my meditation now. Go your way in peace, knowing that you've been of considerable help to a spreader of the true word."

"Thank you, Reverend," Coy said humbly.

Coy stepped down out of the bus. Before he had gone three steps, he heard the cork pop. Smiling, he went off to look for Willow and Aaron Timm.

The sheriff was there bright and

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early the next morning, accompanied by two deputies. Coy, dressed in Brother Monroe's best black suit and a clean white shirt, stepped down from the revival bus to meet them.

"Morning," said the sheriff. "You the parson?"

"Yes, I'm Brother Coy." He smiled and turned to Aaron, who was nearby setting pegs for the tent, and Willow, who was getting ready to prepare breakfast. "This is Sister Willow," Coy said. "She sings hymns at our meetings. And this is Brother Aaron Timm, our fine spiritual organist." He folded his hands in front of him. "How may we be of service to you, Sheriff?"

"Sorry to have to trouble you folks, Reverend," the sheriff said, "but we had a little trouble in town last night. Some gambler named Roscoe got beat up and robbed. We found these where it happened—" He held out a handful of revival circulars.

Coy looked at them and sighed heavily. "I was afraid something like this would happen," he said, with a hint of sadness in his voice. "I'll have to accept the blame, Sheriff. Will you come with me, please?"

Coy led the sheriff and his deputies around to the other side of the bus. On a blanket up close to one of the big tires, Monroe was snoring loudly in drunken sleep. He was unshaved, his hair uncombed, and he was wearing the faded work clothes Coy had stolen off the wash line. On the ground beside him was the unlabeled whiskey bottle, empty.

"We picked him up yesterday," Coy told the sheriff. "He said he'd been a preacher of the Holy Word himself in years gone by, but had fallen on hard times. I offered to let him come along with our group as a handyman until he could get on his feet again. Last night after supper I sent him into town to pass out those handbills. I didn't see him again until this morning." Coy shook his head slowly. "I had no idea he'd been in any trouble."

The sheriff knelt beside Monroe and went through his pockets. He found Roscoe's wallet.

"Looks like this is our man, all right. Pick him up and put him in the car, boys."

"I really don't know what to say, Sheriff," said Coy. "I feel this whole thing is my fault."

"No cause for you to blame yourself, Reverend," the sheriff said. "After all, you was just trying to help him."

"Yes, I know, but I have a feeling that the poor soul isn't responsible. All yesterday he kept saying that our little revival group was just like the one he used to have, and last night he kept referring to the bus

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here as *his* bus. It was as though he thought he was the preacher and we all worked for him."

"Sounds to me like he might be a little touched," said the sheriff, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "If he starts that business with me when he wakes up, I might just send him down to the state hospital for observation."

"Whatever you think would be best for him, Sheriff. After all, you're a professional in these matters. Incidentally, how is the man he beat up?"

"Well, he was worked over pretty good—that old drunk must have used a club on him. He's in the hospital over at the county seat. I reckon he'll be all right in time."

"We can give thanks for that much," Coy said reverently.

"Suppose so," the sheriff said indifferently. They walked back around the bus and the sheriff tipped his hat to Willow. "Well, good day to you folks."

"Good day, Sheriff."

After the sheriff and his deputies left with Monroe, Coy and Willow and Aaron all looked at each other and smiled triumphantly in unison.

That night, due to the gossip stemming from Roscoe's beating and Monroe's arrest, half the townspeople of Gaston turned out to hear the new circuit preacher, Reverend Coy, deliver an inspired sermon on the evils of drink. After the sermon, Sister Willow sang *Give Me That Old-Time Religion*, accompanied on the organ by Brother Aaron Timm. Brother Timm then played a solo medley of hymns while young Reverend Coy himself passed the collection plate.

When Coy returned to the pulpit and handed the money-laden tray to Willow, he noticed that under the tent lights the freckles on her chest seemed to sparkle and glow like the star-sprinkled sky he had looked at while waiting in the alley for Roscoe.

As she took the collection plate from him, Willow squeezed his hand briefly and looked nakedly into his eyes. Coy smiled at her and nodded once.

Being a preacher isn't going to be too bad at all, he thought.

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One good catch certainly deserves another.

Windows of the Soul

by Lee Somerville

I WILL SAY THIS about Wayne Dill: when he was sober, most people could tolerate him. Tall and good-looking and spoiled by too much inherited money, he cut a wide swath with women. Most men didn't like him, but they didn't distrust him as much as I did. You see, I have my own method of judging a person. The eyes are the windows of the soul, I always say. When I talk with a person, I watch his eyes for true indications of his basic nature. Whenever I talked with Wayne—when he was sober, that is—his face

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would smile, his voice would sound friendly; but away back in their depths, his eyes remained cold, egotistical and selfish.

When he got roaring drunk, like he did two or three times a year, he ran hog-wild over everybody in Caton, showing his true nature. He acted almost as bad as my cousin Rudolph over in Mott County; and if there is anybody I hate, it is Rudolph. I've waited for years, hoping somebody would kill old Rudolph just to make me happy.

Anyway, back to Wayne Dill. Until that Saturday morning about two weeks ago, he had been stone-cold sober for four months. It was a beautiful day, good fishing weather, and that's when he pulled the biggest drinking spree of his life—biggest and meanest. He came driving like an idiot onto the gravel road of Caton County Lake, pulling a new red and white boat behind his red and white convertible. Skidding on the gravel, he almost ran into the fishing pier, but somehow maneuvered that boat into the water.

Old Ed Kemp rubbed his scraggly moustache and shook his head. "I guess Wayne's third marriage didn't settle him down none," he whispered.

Irv Aiken shifted his chewing tobacco to the other side of his mouth. "This last marriage won't last no longer'n the others did," he prophesied. "Lois is a nice girl. She won't put up with this."

"She wouldn't have looked at him twice if she hadn't been new in Caton," Jeff Tolbert agreed. "On the other hand, well, you can't tell about women. She was his secretary, and there's something about these big men that sets these shy little girls on fire."

Yeah. My cousin Rudolph had been married four times, and he always got this shy, sweet type just like Wayne always got. Nature's way of keeping a balance, I guess.

Well, Wayne got out of his car and stretched to his full six feet, four inches. All he had on his tanned body was tight, black swim trunks with his name monogrammed across the right side. He had long legs and a slender waist, but he was powerfully built around the chest and shoulders and arms. Far as I was concerned, his brown hair was too long and he had too much sideburns, but he did look like one of those magazine ads for suntan lotion. I could see how natural it was that an old maid like Lois Simms—she said she was a maiden lady—could fall for this conceited dope.

Wayne reached into his car and brought out a brown bottle of whiskey. He took a draft, licked his lips and put the bottle back in the car without offering us any.

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"That boat's too big for this lake," Ed Kemp told him. "And that motor's too big. When we built this county lake, we agreed not to use anything bigger'n twenty horsepower, didn't we?"

"The hell with that talk!" Wayne snapped. "This is ninety horse, and I don't give a damn whether it knocks all the water out of this lake. You give me trouble, old man, and you'll find I don't give a damn about anything!"

Wayne started his big motor, backed into deep water and started for the upper end.

In the middle of the lake, Red Jones and Jim Morse were sitting in Jim's homemade wooden rowboat, cork fishing. They looked up, but didn't stop fishing until Wayne blistered past them on the east side, throwing spray and starting waves that bounced the rowboat up and down.

Red and Jim grabbed the sides of their boat. We couldn't hear them holler above the roar of Wayne's big ninety, but we could see their jaws working up and down.

Wayne turned at the dam, gave the motor full gas, and barely missed Jim and Red from the west side.

I stood there watching, thinking about the time last winter when cousin Rudolph got a new rifle and a fresh bottle of whiskey at the start of deer season in Mott County. Rudolph and Wayne were both show-offs.

Ed Kemp bleated that one of us ought to call the sheriff. We agreed, but nobody made a move to leave. Each one of us strained forward, looking at Jim and Red out there in that little boat, hoping they'd make it to shore. They got their oars out as the boat quieted, and began paddling frantically for the east bank.

Wayne threw his head back and whooped with laughter. You could see his white teeth shining, even at that distance. He idled north to the mouth of the lake and turned around leisurely. Then, when Red and Jim were within fifty feet of the bank, he opened up the motor and cut between them and land. They threw oars aside at the last minute and clung to the boat for dear life.

It was a tight little rowboat, even if it was homemade. It kicked up and down and dived and spun in the wake of churning water, but it stayed right side up and afloat.

Wayne cut the motor after that. Leaning back on the driver's seat under the canvas top, he produced another brown bottle. He sat there laughing and guzzling while Jim and Red paddled like mad to shore. Their car was close to us on the west bank, but you could bet they wouldn't get back into their boat

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until Wayne had left the lake.

Irv and Jeff and Ed and I again talked about going for the sheriff. Ed said one more cast and he'd go. He changed to a yellow spinning lure and threw just as far as he could, beginning a slow retrieve.

Out in the water something grabbed that lure, nearly tearing the rod from Ed's hand. Ed hollered. A big bass broke water and danced on its tail.

"Gol dang!" Irv Aiken swallowed his chewing tobacco. "Gol dang, did you see that?"

Jeff guessed it would weigh ten pounds.

Ed hung on, grinning like a lobo while he played that big-mouthed black bass. When it broke water again, leaping high into the air, we agreed with Jeff that it was the biggest bass ever hooked in Caton County Lake.

From near the dam, Wayne's ninety horsepower revved to life and the big red and white boat pounced like a tiger. That drunken coot had to have more fun. He cut his boat right in front of us, wrapping Ed's line across the bow. Ed screamed like a banshee when the line broke.

Wayne brought the boat to a rough landing on the ramp close to us.

Ed ran toward him, then stopped short. I guess he realized just in time that he wasn't even a David, while Wayne was a sure-enough Goliath.

"You fool!" Ed threatened. "I'm going after Sheriff Hulen!"

Wayne found his brown bottle again and sucked it dry. "You do that, shorty," he dared. He threw the empty bottle into the water.

"Litterbug!" Ed accused.

Stretching to his full height, Wayne looked down at old Ed. "Out of my way, little man."

Ed almost ran to his pickup truck.

He'd barely left when Lois drove up in Wayne's other car. Wayne looked at his bride with a sulky stare, then asked if she'd brought the water skis like he'd told her to.

Yep, Lois had the skis in the car. That wasn't all she had brought. The other door of the car opened and out stepped the cutest human female I ever saw up close. She looked a lot like Lois, only younger. Same kind of blue eyes and golden hair, same expression, same sweet and delicate sculpturing of face that made both girls look small and refined and utterly ladylike. The resemblance stopped there. This girl—she had to be Lois' kid sister—shone, where Lois looked a bit faded. She was dressed in pink shorts and halter, sexier-looking than most girls in bikinis.

Wayne grabbed this girl and

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swung her around, calling her Jill and acting like she was the greatest thing he'd seen all day.

Lois stood beside the car, biting her lip and putting on a show of not being jealous. I've seen my cousin Rudolph's various wives act the same way when he flirted with younger girls. Our grandfather used to notice it, too. Before Grandpa died, I guess he must've gotten wise to Rudolph, even though he always was partial to that spoiled brat. He fixed his will so that none of the sawmill property would go to Rudolph's wives. He still made Rudolph the manager of the overall plant at Blossom in Mott County, saying that Rudolph was better at money matters than I was—but because he got wise to Rudolph and his weakness for women, Grandpa fixed it so all the sawmill property would have to stay in our family. If Rudolph died, for example, I'd take his place as manager of the home plant in Blossom instead of operating the smaller property in Caton County like I was doing.

But I was telling you about Wayne Dill. First thing we knew, he was hollering at Lois to operate the boat while he showed Jill how he could water-ski.

Lois held back. "I'm scared of water, darling."

"Scared, hell! You handled this boat just fine up in Arkansas two days ago. Get in here," he yelled.

"You gave me one lesson, Wayne. Please don't make me try it again."

"Stop jabbering and get under that wheel!"

"I'm afraid, darling." Her lips trembled and her eyes blinked. "Can't one of your friends here drive the boat?"

Jeff and Irv tried to talk to Wayne. Rocking back on his heels, he told them to shut up.

I looked at both girls real close, then at that big boat. Sooner or later, I figured, somebody was going to get killed, and probably sooner if Ed didn't get back here with Sheriff Hulen.

"Get in the damned boat!" Wayne commanded. "All you have to remember is to pull the gas down to here when you start it, like this. You go straight to the middle of the lake, then head south. I won't fall off the skis, but if I do, you circle back and pick me up. You got that?"

"Darling, I—"

"You can do it. You did fine two days ago."

Jill tried to talk Lois into staying on shore. Lois looked confused and started to cry. Wayne broke down and patted her and gave her a big smile, and she got into that boat looking hypnotized.

For a beginner, she took off fairly

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smooth. Beginner's luck ran out in the middle of the lake. She started to zigzag, and that tossed Wayne off his skis. She cut south without looking back.

Wayne waved his arms and hollered at the top of his big lungs.

Lois cut her speed and looked back.

"Damn it, pick me up!" he yelled.

She gave it the gas again. Irv hollered at her not to crash into the south dam, and Jim and Red waved from the east bank like they were trying to warn her. She got the boat turned around somehow and pointed it straight at Wayne's head. She missed by about fifty feet. She drove that boat all over the lake trying to turn around again.

Wayne waved his arms and yelled drunken advice.

Jill stood on tiptoes, hands reaching out for her sister, tears streaming down her cheeks. "She'll drown herself! She doesn't know anything about boats. She'll drown herself!"

Irv said she probably wished her sister had never heard of Caton and Caton County. Jill agreed.

"We had this dress shop, but we had to sell it when Mother died," she explained. "We didn't have enough money for another shop, so Lois found this job in Caton while I found another job for myself. Do you know that six weeks ago she'd never even met that—that monster out there?"

Sheriff Hulen drove up with Ed Kemp and a couple of deputies. They ran to the dock where the county boat is kept under lock.

Out on the lake, Lois got the boat straightened out.

Wayne yelled extra loud for her to stop fooling around. That must have jolted her, because the motor roared at top speed and the boat lurched forward, kicking white spray and leaving a wide, white wake. Lois bent over the steering wheel, a brave, pathetic figure of a wife who'd do anything for her new husband.

She smashed into Wayne at full speed. When the wake cleared, we saw the water had turned pink around the dark blob that had been Wayne Dill.

The boat kept moving in crazy zigzags while Lois stood up and screamed. She was hysterical when Sheriff Hulen rescued her.

They sent her to the hospital in my car before they fished the body out of the water. To tell the truth, the community was a lot more concerned with her welfare than about Wayne's. He was dead anyhow—the prop had cut into his thick skull, chopped on his backbone and cut into his shoulders. Did a really good job, but then it was a ninety-horsepower motor.

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The coroner's verdict was accidental death, of course. Couldn't have been any other way. Red Jones and Jim Morse and Ed Kemp had some scorching testimony. Ed said his only regret was that it must've been a shock to that sweet bride and her kid sister. Most of the community agreed with that, too.

Doc Burns kept Lois in the hospital for a week, under sedation. People sent flowers and sympathy cards. Banker Lennox said she got fifty thousand dollars' insurance, plus some of the property, and that wasn't near enough to compensate for the scars on her soul and mind that would last her the rest of her life.

The more I thought about Lois and Jill, the more I thought about my cousin Rudolph. I couldn't get into the hospital for a private talk with Lois, but I did get to talk with Jill. I told her how the town of Blossom in Mott County needed a dress shop. I told her it was a nice, quiet town where her sister could recover from her horrible experience.

I watched her eyes while I told her about Rudolph. I told her he carried lots of insurance, and that nobody would go deer hunting with him because he was accident-prone when he'd been drinking. I warned her he was a lot like Wayne, and if she did move to Blossom, she'd better keep her sister away from that kind of man.

Jill blinked a lot, and her eyes stayed downcast and shy, but they were cold and calculating back in their icy-blue depths—just like Lois' eyes, when Wayne had bullied her into operating that boat; like Lois' eyes had been, deep down, from the time she "accidentally" settled in Caton and took that job as Wayne's secretary.

Jill looked down at her manicured fingernails. "Oh, I hope she's learned her lesson," she said in a little girl voice. "But Blossom does sound like a wonderful town for our dress shop. Do you suppose it would hurt for me just to look at the town?"

"It won't hurt a bit," I said. What I meant was that it wouldn't hurt *me*. "I hope you two settle there. It's a quiet place, but it sure has possibilities."

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It is said to be the wise man's task to decide whether things are what they appear to be . . . or they are not, and yet appear to be.

MRS. PATRICK CONNORS was a tall woman with soft brown eyes and a thin face battered by thirty years of the wrong men.

"My son Boyd died yesterday, Mr. Fortune," she said in my office. "I want to know who killed him. I have money."

She held her handbag in both hands as if she expected I might grab it. She worked in the ticket booth of an all-night movie on Forty-Second Street, and a lost dollar bill was a very real tragedy for her. Boyd had been her only child.

"He was a pretty good boy," I said, which was a lie, but she was his mother. "How did it happen?"

"He was a wild boy with bad friends," Mrs. Connors said. "But he was my son, and he was still very young. What happened, I don't know. That's why I'm here."

"I mean, how was he killed?"

"I don't know, but he was. It was murder, Mr. Fortune."

That was when my missing arm began to tingle. It does that when I sense something wrong.

"What do the police say, Mrs. Connors?"

"The medical examiner says that Boyd died of a heart attack. The police won't even investigate. But I know it was murder."

My arm had been right, it usually

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is. There was a lot wrong. Medical examiners in New York don't make many mistakes, but how do you tell that to a distraught mother?

"Mrs. Connors," I said, "we've got the best medical examiners in the country here. They had to do an autopsy. They didn't guess."

"Boyd was twenty years old, Mr. Fortune. He lifted weights, had never been sick a day in his life. A healthy young boy."

It wasn't going to be easy. "There was a fourteen-year-old girl in San Francisco who died last year of hardening of the arteries, Mrs. Connors. The autopsy proved it. It happens, I'm sorry."

by Michael Collins

"A week ago," Mrs. Connors said, "Boyd enlisted in the Air Force. He asked to be flight crew. They examined him for two days. He was in perfect shape, they accepted him for flight training. He was to leave in a month."

Could I tell her that doctors make mistakes? Which doctors? The Air Force doctors, or the medical examiner's doctors? Could I refuse even to look?

"I'll see what I can find," I said. "But the M.E. and the police know their work, Mrs. Connors."

"This time, they're wrong," she said, opening her purse.

It took most of the afternoon before I cornered Sergeant Hamm in the precinct squad room. He swore at crazy old ladies, at his work load, and at me, but he took me over to see the M.E. who had worked on Boyd Connors.

"Boyd Connors died of a natural heart attack," the M.E. said. "I'm sorry for the mother, but the autopsy proved it."

"At twenty? Any signs of previous heart attacks? Any congenital weakness, hidden disease?"

"No. There sometimes isn't any, and more people die young of heart attacks than most know. It was his first, and his last, coronary."

"He passed an Air Force physical for flight training a week ago," I said.

"A week ago?" The M.E. frowned. "Well, that makes it even more unusual, yes. But unusual or not, he died of a natural coronary attack, period. And in case you're wondering, I've certified more heart attack deaths than most doctors do common colds. All right?"

As we walked to Sergeant Hamm's car outside the East Side Morgue, Hamm said, "If you still have any crazy ideas about it being

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murder, like the mother says, I'll tell you that Boyd Connors was alone in his own room when he died. No way into that room except through the livingroom, no fire escape, and only Mrs. Connors herself in the livingroom. Okay?"

"Yeah," I said. "Swell."

Hamm said, "Don't take the old woman for too much cash, Danny. Just humor her a little."

After leaving Hamm, I went to the Connors' apartment, a fifth-floor walk-up. It was cheap and worn, but it was neat—a home. A pot of tea stood on the table as Mrs. Connors let me in. She poured me a cup. There was no one else there, Mr. Patrick Connors having gone to distant parts long ago.

I sat, drank my tea. "Tell me, just what happened?"

"Last night Boyd came home about eight o'clock," the mother said. "He looked angry, went into his room. Perhaps five minutes later I heard him cry out, a choked kind of cry. I heard him fall. I ran in, found him on the floor near his bureau. I called the police."

"He was alone in his room?"

"Yes, but they killed him somehow. His friends!"

"What friends?"

"A street gang—the Night Angels. Thieves and bums!"

"Where did he work, Mrs. Connors?"

"He didn't have a job. Just the Air Force, soon."

"All right." I finished my tea. "Where's his room?"

It was a small room at the rear, with a narrow bed, a closet full of gaudy clothes, a set of barbells, and the usual litter of brushes, cologne, hair tonic and after-shave on the bureau. There was no outside way into the room, and no way to reach it without passing through the livingroom; no signs of violence, nothing that looked to me like a possible weapon.

All that my searching and crawling got me was an empty box and wrapping paper from some drugstore, in the wastebasket, and an empty men's cologne bottle under the bureau. That, and three matchbooks were under the same bureau, a tube of toothpaste under the bed, and some dirty underwear. Boyd Connors hadn't been neat.

I went back out to Mrs. Connors. "Where had Boyd been last night?" I asked.

"How do I know?" she said bitterly. "With that gang, probably. In some bars. Perhaps with his girlfriend, Anna Kazco. Maybe they had a fight, that's why he was angry."

"When did Boyd decide to join the Air Force?"

"About two weeks ago. I was surprised."

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"All right," I said. "Where does this Anna Kazco live?"

She told me.

I left and went to the address Mrs. Connors had given me. An older woman opened the door. A bleached blonde, she eyed me until I told her what I wanted. Then she looked unhappy, but she let me in.

"I'm Grace Kazco," the blonde said, "Anna's mother. I'm sorry about Boyd Connors. I wanted better than him for my daughter, but I didn't know he was sick. Poor Anna feels terrible about it."

"How do you feel about it?" I asked.

Her eyes flashed at me. "Sorry, like I said, but I'm not all busted up. Boyd Connors wasn't going to amount to a hill of beans. Now maybe Anna can—"

The girl came from an inner room. "What can Anna do?"

She was small and dark, a delicate girl whose eyes were puffed with crying.

"You can pay attention to Roger, that's what!" the mother snapped. "He'll make something of himself."

"There wasn't anything wrong with Boyd!"

"Except he was all talk and dream and do-nothing. A street-corner big shot! Roger works instead of dreaming."

"Who's this Roger?" I asked.

"Roger Tatum," the mother said. "A solid, hard-working boy who likes Anna. He won't run off to any Air Force."

"After last night," Anna said, "maybe he won't be running here again, either."

"What happened last night?" I queried.

Anna sat down. "Boyd had a date with me, but Roger had dropped around first. He was here when Boyd came. They got mad at each other, mother told Boyd to leave. She always sides with Roger. I was Boyd's date, Roger had no right to break in, but Mother got me so mad I told them both to get out. I was wrong. It made Boyd angry. Maybe that made the heart attack happen. Maybe I—"

"Stop that!" the mother said. "It wasn't your fault."

Under the bleached hair and the dictatorial manner, she was just a slum mother trying to do the best for her daughter.

"Did they get out when you told them?" I asked.

Anna nodded. "They left together. That was the last time I ever saw poor Boyd."

"What time was that?"

"About seven o'clock, I think."

"Where do I find this Roger Tatum? What does he do for a living?"

"He lives over on Greenwich Avenue, number 110," Anna told me. "He works for Johnson's Pharmacy

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on Fifth Avenue. Cleans up, delivers, like that."

"It's only a temporary job," the mother said. "Roger has good offers he's considering."

The name of Johnson's Pharmacy struck a chord in my mind. Where had I heard the name? Or seen it?

Roger Tatum let me into his room. He was a small, thin youth who wore rimless glasses and had nice manners; the kind of boy mothers like—polite, nose to the grindstone. His single room was bare, except for books everywhere.

"I heard about Boyd," Tatum said. "Awful thing."

"You didn't like him too much, though, did you?"

"I had nothing against him. We just liked the same girl."

"Which one of you did Anna like?"

"Ask her," Tatum snapped.

"Not that it matters now, does it?" I said. "Boyd Connors is dead, the mother likes you, an inside track all the way."

"I suppose so," he said, watching me.

"What happened after you left the Kazco apartment with Boyd? You left together? Did you fight, maybe?"

"Nothing happened. We argued some on the sidewalk. He went off, I finished my deliveries. I'm not supposed to stop anywhere when I deliver, and I was late, so I had to hurry. When I finished delivering, I went back to the shop, then I came home. I was here all night after that."

"No fight on the street? Maybe knock Boyd Connors down? He could have been hurt more than you knew."

"Me knock down Boyd? He was twice my size."

"You were here alone the rest of the night?"

"Yes. You think I did something to Boyd?"

"I don't know what you did."

I left him standing there in his bare room with his plans for the future. Did he have a motive for murder? Not really; people don't murder over an eighteen-year-old girl that often. Besides, Boyd Connors had died of a heart attack.

I gave out the word in a few proper places that I'd like to talk to the Night Angels—five dollars in it, and no trouble. Maybe I'd reach them, maybe I wouldn't. There was nothing else to do that I could think of, so I stopped for a few Irish whiskeys, then went home to bed.

About noon the next day, a small, thin, acne-scarred boy with cold eyes and a hungry face came into my office. He wore the leather-jacket and shabby-jeans uniform, and the hunger in his face was the

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perpetual hunger of the lost street-kid for a lot more than food. He looked seventeen, had the cool manner of twenty-seven with experience. His name was Carlo.

"Five bucks, you offered," Carlo said first.

I gave him five dollars. He didn't sit down.

"Boyd Connors' mother says Boyd was murdered," I said. "What do you say?"

"What's it to you?"

"I'm working for Mrs. Connors. The police say heart attack."

"We heard," Carlo said. He relaxed just a hair. "Boyd was sound as a dollar. It don't figure. On'y what angle the fuzz got? We don' make it."

"Was Boyd with you that night?"

"Early 'n late. He goes to see his girl. They had a battle, Boyd come around the candy store a while."

"What time?"

"Maybe seven-thirty. He don' stay long. Went home."

"Because he didn't feel good?"

"No. He feel okay," Carlo said.

I saw the struggle on his face. His whole life, the experience learned over years when every day taught more than a month taught most kids, had conditioned him never to volunteer an answer without a direct question. But he had something to say, and as hard as he searched his mind for a trap, he couldn't find one. He decided to talk to me.

"Boyd, he had a package," Carlo finally said, tore it out of his thin mouth. "He took it on home."

"Stolen?"

"He said no. He said he found it. He had a big laugh on it. Said he found it on the sidewalk, 'n the guy lost it could rot in trouble."

That was when I remembered where I had seen the name of Johnson's Pharmacy.

"A package when he came home?" Mrs. Connors said. "Well, I'm not sure, Mr. Fortune. He could have had."

I went through the livingroom into Boyd Connors' bedroom. The wrapping paper was still in the wastebasket. Mrs. Connors was neglecting her housework, with the grief over Boyd. A Johnson's Pharmacy label was on the wrapping paper, and a handwritten address: 3 East Eleventh Street. The small, empty box told me nothing.

I checked all the cologne, aftershave and hair-tonic bottles—the box was about the size for them. They were all at least half full and old. I thought of the empty bottle under the bed, and got it; a good men's cologne—and empty. It had no top. I searched harder, found the top all the way across the room in a corner, as if it had been thrown. It was a quick-twist top, one sharp

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turn and it came off. I saw a faint stain on the rug as if something had been spilled, but a cologne is mostly alcohol, dries fast.

I touched the bottle gingerly, studied it. There was something odd about it; not to look at, no, more an impression, the *feel* of it. It felt different, heavier, than the other bottles, and the cap seemed more solid. Only a shade of difference, something I'd never have thought about if I hadn't been looking for answers.

I could even be wrong. When you're ready to find something suspicious, your mind can play tricks, find what it wants to find.

I decided to see Roger Tatum again. He was working over a book, writing notes when I arrived.

"Not working? Fired, maybe?"

"I don't go to work until one p.m.," he said. "Why would I be fired?"

"You lost a package you were supposed to deliver last night, didn't you?"

He stared at me. "Yes, but how did you know? And you think Mr. Johnson would fire me for that? It wasn't worth five dollars; Mr. Johnson didn't even make me pay. Just sent me back this morning with another bottle."

"Bottle of what?"

"Some men's cologne."

"When did you miss the package, notice that it was gone?"

"When I got to the address. It was gone. I guess I just dropped it."

"You dropped it," I said. "Did anything happen between the drugstore and Anna Kazco's place? Did you stop anywhere? Have an accident and drop the packages?"

"No. I went straight to Anna's place. I had all the packages when I left, I counted them."

"So you know you dropped the package after you left Anna Kazco's apartment."

"Yes, I'm sure."

My next stop was the Johnson Pharmacy on Fifth Avenue. Mr. Yvor Johnson was a tall, pale man. He blinked at me from behind his counter.

"The package Roger lost? I don't understand what your interest in it is, Mr. Fortune. A simple bottle of cologne."

"Who was it going to?"

"Mr. Chalmers Padgett, a regular customer. He always buys his sundries here."

"Who is he? What does he do?"

"Mr. Padgett? Well, I believe he's the president of a large chemical company."

"Who ordered the cologne?"

"Mr. Padgett himself. He called earlier that day."

"Who packed the cologne? Wrapped it?"

"I did myself. Just before Roger

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took it out," he said slowly.

I showed him the empty bottle and the cap. He took them, looked at them. He looked at me.

"It looks like the bottle. A standard item. We sell hundreds of bottles."

"Is it the same bottle? You're sure? Feel it."

Johnson frowned, studied the bottle and the cap. He bent close over them, hefted the bottle, inspected the cap, hit the bottle lightly on his counter. He looked puzzled.

"That's strange. I'd almost say this bottle is a special glass, very strong. The cap, too. They seem the same; I'd not have noticed if you hadn't insisted, but they do seem stronger."

"After you packed the cologne for Mr. Padgett, how long before Roger Tatum took out his deliveries?"

"Perhaps fifteen minutes."

"Was anyone else in the store?"

"I think there were a few customers."

"Did you and Roger ever leave the packages he was to deliver unwatched?"

"No, they are on the shelf back here until Roger takes them, and—" He stopped, blinked. "Yes, wait. Roger took some trash out in back, and the man asked me if he could look at a vaporizer. I keep the bulky stock, like vaporizers, in the back. I went to get it. I was gone perhaps three minutes."

"The man? What man?"

"A big man, florid-faced. In a gray overcoat and gray hat. He didn't buy the vaporizer, I had to put it back. I was quite annoyed, I recall."

"Roger took the packages out right after that?"

"Yes, he did."

That conversation prompted me to visit Mr. Chalmers Padgett, president of P-S Chemical Corp. Not as large a company as Johnson had thought, and Dun & Bradstreet didn't list exactly what the company produced. Padgett met me in his rich office down near Wall Street. He was a calm, pale man in a custom-made suit.

"Yes, Mr. Fortune, I ordered my usual cologne from Johnson a few days ago. Why?"

"Could anyone have known you ordered it?"

"I don't know, perhaps. I believe I called from the office here."

"Are you married?"

"I'm a widower. I live alone, if that's what you mean."

"What would you do when you got a bottle of cologne?"

"Do? Well, I'd use it, I suppose. I—" Padgett smiled at me. "That's very odd. I mean, that you would ask that. As a matter of fact I have

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something of a reflex habit—I smell things. Wines, cheeses, tobacco. I expect I'd have smelled the cologne almost at once. But you couldn't have known that."

"Who could have known it? About that habit?"

"Almost anyone who knows me. It's rather a joke."

"What does your company make, Mr. Padgett?"

His pale face closed up. "I'm sorry, much of our work is secret, for the government."

"Maybe *Rauwolfia serpentina*? Something like it?"

I had stopped at the library to do research. Chalmers Padgett looked at me with alarm and a lot of suspicion.

"I can't talk about our secret work. You—"

I said, "Do you have a heart condition, Mr. Padgett? A serious condition? Could you die of a heart attack—easily?"

He watched me. "Have you been investigating me, Mr. Fortune?"

"In a way," I said. "You *do* have a heart condition?"

"Yes. No danger if I'm careful, calm. But—"

"But if you died of a heart attack, no one would be surprised? No one would question it?"

"There would be no question," Chalmers Padgett said. He studied me. "One of our subsidiaries, very secret, does make some *Rauwolfia serpentina*, Mr. Fortune. For government use."

"Who would want you dead, Mr. Padgett?"

A half hour later, Mr. Padgett and I stopped for the drugstore owner, Mr. Johnson. Padgett rode in the back seat of the car with Sergeant Hamm and me.

"Rauwolfia serpentina," I said. "Did you ask the M.E.?"

"I asked," Sergeant Hamm said. "Related to common tranquilizers. Developed as a nerve gas for warfare before we supposedly gave up that line of study. Spray it on the skin, breathe it, a man's dead in seconds. Depresses the central nervous system, stops the heart cold. Yeah, the M.E. told me about it. Says he never saw a case of its use, but he'd heard of cases. Seems it works almost instantly, and the autopsy will show nothing but a plain heart attack. A spy weapon, government assassins. No cop in New York ever heard of a case. Who can get any of it?"

"P-S Chemical has a subsidiary that makes some; very secret," I said. "Under pressure in a bottle, it spurts in the face of anyone who opens it to sniff. Dead of a heart attack. The bottle drops from the victim's hand, the pressure empties the bottle. No trace—unless you test the

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bottle very carefully, expertly."

"In my case," Chalmers Padgett said, "who would have tested the bottle? I die of a heart attack, there would be no thought of murder. Expected. I ordered the cologne, the bottle belonged in my apartment. No one would even have noticed the bottle."

We stopped at a Park Avenue apartment house and all went up to the tenth floor. The man who stood up in the elegant, sunken livingroom when the houseman led us into the apartment was big and florid-faced. Something happened to his arrogant eyes when he saw Chalmers Padgett.

"Yes," Mr. Johnson said, "that's the man who asked me to show him the vaporizer, who was alone in the store with the packages."

Chalmers Padgett said, "For some years we've disagreed on how to run our company. He won't sell his share to me, and he hasn't the cash to buy my share. He lives high. If I died, he would have the company, and a large survivor's insurance. He's the only one who would gain by my death. My partner, Samuel Seaver. He's the one."

I said, "Executive vice-president of P-S Chemical. One of the few people who could get *Rauwolfia serpentina.*"

The big man, Samuel Seaver, seemed to sway where he stood and stared only at Chalmers Padgett. His eyes showed fear, yes, but confusion, too, and incredulity. He had planned a perfect murder. Chalmers Padgett's death would have been undetectable, no question of murder. No one would have noticed Seaver's lethal bottle, it *belonged* in Padgett's rooms.

However, Roger Tatum had dropped the package, Boyd Connors had taken it home and opened the bottle. Boyd Connors had no heart condition. Boyd Connors' mother did not believe the heart attack. The bottle had *not* belonged in Boyd's room.

Sergeant Hamm began to recite, "Samuel Seaver, you're under arrest for the murder of Boyd Connors. It's my duty to advise you that—"

"Who?" the big man, Samuel Seaver, said unwittingly. "Murder of who?"

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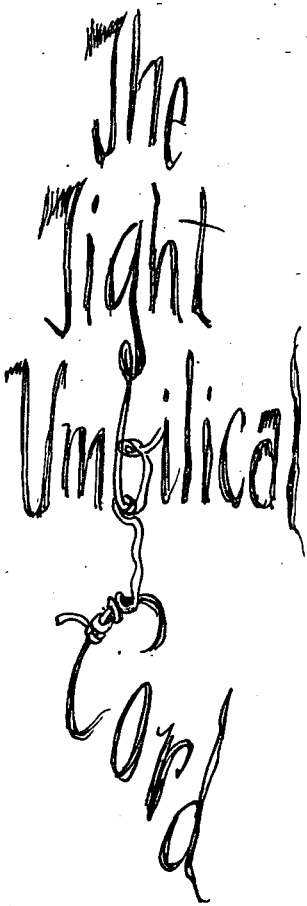
Occasionally there is one who is worthy of the strictest attention from those around him.



GORDON and his mother moved into the house next door two years ago when Gordon was nine, a handsome boy, slight, almost fragile looking. His golden hair swept back from a high forehead and curled around his ears, making me think of a medieval prince, and his manners were princelike too.

He was a delight to know, especially for me, a retired schoolteacher now without my classroom children. I felt privileged, truly blessed that this wonderful child lived so close and that his mother, Effie, worked.

Gordon arrived home from school much earlier than his mother arrived from work, so I told her, "Well, you won't have to worry about anything happening to Gordon during the time he's alone. I'll keep an eye on him."

"I *never* worry about *anything* happening to *Gordon*," she answered, which seemed pretty unnatural to me.

I said he could come to my house right after school each day if he wanted to and I'd give him milk and cookies and, you know, listen to

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any of his troubles that wouldn't wait until his mother came home, and she said Gordon never had any troubles, it was the people around Gordon who had troubles.

When I told her Gordon could regard my house as his home too, she warned me to be careful. I thought she meant be careful of Gordon, and I bristled a little. My stars! I taught for 25 years and no one has to tell me how to be careful of kids, but Effie said she didn't mean that. She meant I should be careful for myself.

Strange woman!

I watched her toss salt over her shoulder, turn her back so the black cat in the neighborhood wouldn't walk across her path, stay in bed whenever a Friday the 13th came along . . . I saw her do all those things, but I didn't know about the umbilical cord until they'd lived there maybe six, seven months and we had the brush fire up on the hill.

It was a late afternoon in the fall, when the hot Santa Ana winds blew—the very worst time for a fire—starting after Gordon had arrived home from school and before Effie got home from work.

I heard the fire engine up on the ridge and raced out, grabbing the hose and calling for Gordon, who came immediately from somewhere—frightened, of course, a sensitive boy like that—shaking with fright, so that when the firemen got it contained, I sent him into the house to lie down. That's where he was when his mother came home.

"We had a brush fire," I an-

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nounced when Effie stepped out of her car and looked up at the hill.

"I see," she said.

"It was pretty scary for a while," I said. "It wasn't really bad, but it could have been."

"It was probably meant to be," she said.

"Well, the flames certainly meant it," I said. "The firemen think someone probably tossed a cigarette out of a car up on the ridge road. You know how careless smokers are."

"It wasn't a smoker." She shook her head. "It was started intentionally," just as if she knew all about it. "Where was Gordon?" she asked, and I thought, well, thank heaven, at last she's showing some consideration for that poor child.

"Oh, as soon as I heard the engine and saw the fire so close, I called him. He popped out from somewhere. I think he was inside the house. Anyway, he was here in a jiffy. That poor little tyke was scared out of his wits, and trying not to show it."

"He wasn't scared," said Effie. "He was excited. And he wasn't inside the house, he was up on that hill tossing a match in the dry brush."

"Why, Effie Sanders!" I exclaimed, shocked, "You sound like you think Gordon's in the habit of setting fires, and you know full well, don't you, Effie, what a dear—"

"It isn't a habit," she interrupted. "This is the first fire he ever set, and he'll never set another. Not Gordon. He'll think of something different next time. He's very imaginative," and she started for the house.

"Effie," I called her back. "Effie Sanders, I think you're awful, accusing your own son. That darling child." I clasped my hands. "The little medieval prince."

"He's evil all right," she said bitterly. "He is cursed with evil," and that's when she told me about the umbilical cord, right out there in broad daylight—well, dusk anyway—as if she were talking of the weather or a TV program or something. She said, "You know, Gordon was born with the umbilical cord around his neck."

Of course I didn't know that. How could I know something like that? My face heated up with a flush of embarrassment at the barest mention of an umbilical cord—I suppose, being a little old-fashioned and quite unversed in all aspects of sex, I was somewhat flustered by this particular subject matter which, I feel, should be of the utmost privacy, certainly not discussed with a maiden lady.

"And that's a sign," Effie said with finality, just as sure of herself and as dedicated to the superstition she was about to relate as she was

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when she threw salt over her shoulder or cuddled that awful rabbit's foot she had hanging to her key chain. "When a baby is born with the umbilical cord around his neck, he is cursed," and she walked into the house.

Well!

Poor little Gordon! Believe me, I doubled my efforts to make him feel wanted, trusted and loved. I opened my heart and my home and if ever there was an angel, he was it, the motherless little creature! Now, I don't mean that Effie didn't act like a mother sometimes. She did—on the surface. She had a Christmas tree for Gordon, for instance, and bought him gifts. She washed his clothes and dressed him nice. The father, I understand, had died a year or two previously, "in a car accident," Effie said without expression. "He and Gordon were in the car together. The car swerved off the road, hit a telephone pole, and killed my husband instantly. But Gordon didn't get a scratch. They said he was probably thrown out, but I think he jumped. He jumped just after he twisted the steering wheel and killed his father."

"Effie!" I cried. "I don't believe it."

"Don't you?"

"Your husband probably lost control—"

"Sure he did," she said. "Gordon saw to that."

"My goodness, Gordon was only what? Seven? Eight?"

"Strong, though," she said. "He's a very strong child, just as evil is strong. My husband had his seat belt fastened. Gordon's was too, when they started out. I know that. So Gordon unfastened his, jerked the steering wheel and jumped."

Well, really!

"Oh, I knew he was cursed when he was born with the umbilical cord around his neck," she said. "It would have been better if he'd died."

"Effie!" I exclaimed.

"Better if he'd strangled before the doctor made him live."

"Effie!"

Yet she played out the mother role by providing for Gordon, attending his needs, coldly celebrating the days that are celebrated, like Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, but not his birthday. Never his birthday that came along in March, the month when there's nothing else to celebrate. You'd think the child would have been resentful, would have turned mean, but not Gordon. He remained sweet and unspoiled.

Effie lavished far more attention on that dog than she ever did on her own son!

Now, I don't care two figs for

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dogs—dirty, smelly little beasts. This one, a stray, came nosing around the neighborhood, looking for handouts and picked Effie's house to stay. "I would prefer," she said with hesitation, "that he'd have picked some other house."

"Well," I said, preferring it too, "I suppose every boy should have a dog. That's what they say, anyway."

"He isn't Gordon's dog," she said quickly. "Gordon couldn't care less and neither could the dog. It's me he wants."

So she kept the dog, or rather, as she told me, she couldn't make him go away. The dog arrived in March, not long after Gordon's tenth birthday which, of course, Effie had not celebrated, and the hippies arrived in June about the time school let out for the summer. There was this big old Victorian house on the corner—they rented that, a bunch of them, boys and girls together with their beads and their beards. I was all for getting a petition to drive them off, and Effie asked, "Why?"

"For goodness' sake," I answered her, "because they are hippies and Gordon is here, a little ten-year-old boy. I'm worried about what they might do to him."

"I don't worry about that," she said. "I worry about what he might do to them."

That woman!

Well, with Gordon home all day during summer vacation and his mother gone all day at work, it was simply up to me to watch that child like a hawk, not to keep him out of mischief because there wasn't a mischievous bone in his body, but to keep those hippies away from him. It's true that they usually roared their motorcycles out the other end of the block and their rock music became a bother only when the wind was in the right direction—but just the same, anybody with half an ounce of brains could figure out what was probably going on in that house with those boy and girl hippies all scrambled up together, and I certainly didn't want them to contaminate a little prince like Gordon.

They were fairly neat, which surprised me, like keeping the lawn mowed and not throwing any beer cans in the driveway. They even painted the trim on that Victorian house. But what a color! Imagine all that gingerbread painted a bright blue! It looked like a party cake with poisoned icing.

Well, paint never hurt anybody and I got used to it just as I got used to the dog next door. He lay patiently in the sun on the porch every day, waiting for Effie to come home.

As each day came to a close and the sun left the porch, he always

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rose to point down the street in quivering anticipation, ears cocked for the sound of her car. I had to give him credit, he stayed right there in his own yard without making a nuisance of himself and never jumped all over people except for Effie, who didn't seem to mind. I guess it was as she had said, the dog had a special fondness for her and nobody else counted.

He was sleeping there on the porch that warm August afternoon of my eye doctor appointment. I even spoke to him as I backed down the driveway. "Good-bye, dog," I said, and he opened one eye, closing it again as I swung into the street.

I had invited Gordon to go along, offering him the promise of a soda, but he had some microscope project going that he could not bear to leave. I was gone four hours, what with waiting for my eyes to come back into focus after the dilating drops and some shopping I had to do, arriving home just as Effie parked in front of her house.

She always parked on the street, her house having no garage, only a kind of little tool shed tucked in the back. Her stopping at the curb and turning off her engine was a signal to the dog, who always sprang off the porch at that instant and bounded toward her, tail wagging so vigorously he bounced a zigzag dance across the lawn to Effie.

But he wasn't bouncing that evening as I drove up my driveway and into the garage and Effie parked. There was no dog in the yard. I carried my packages into the kitchen and opened the cookie jar to note with satisfaction that Gordon had had his snack, leaving his washed glass on the sink. Such a considerate boy, I thought, such a little prince, and wondered where he was. If he were on the hill, he should come home. I'd warned him about too many hours in the sun on the hill, he was so fair-skinned.

I went out to look for him and there was Effie screaming her lungs out for that dog, with no thought of where her son was.

"He's gone," she cried from her yard to mine.

"The dog?" I asked.

"He's always here." Her voice rose hysterically. "Always," as she made a distracted turn, taking in all of the yard, and wrung her hands.

"Maybe he went up on the hill with Gordon," I suggested. "Gordon was going up with his microscope and maybe—"

"Gordon! Oh, no!" and then wouldn't you think she'd start toward the hill, calling Gordon? But no, she didn't. She scampered in little abstracted circles around her yard as if she could find the dog hiding behind a sparse bush or under a

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blade of grass. How ridiculous!

Then she made a beeline for the tool shed, whimpering while she ran. She yanked open the door and screamed. I followed, jumping over the hedge just as if I didn't have arthritis, and out of the corner of my eye I caught sight of Gordon on his way down the hill. *Thank God he was all right!*

I reached the shed, grabbed each side of the doorway and looked into the shadows. I turned my head and gagged.

I looked again. Effie, on her knees beside the dying dog, held him, drying blue paint already smearing her arms. The dog lolled out a weak tongue and licked her once. His eyes rolled back, bright white against bright blue. His head dropped on Effie's arm.

I turned away from the macabre sight of that poor blue creature—even his tongue was stained with paint from trying to lick it off. I staggered from the doorway into the sunshine, away from the ragged sound of his dying breaths.

Then I remembered and ran to meet Gordon in order to head him off from the terrible thing there in the shed . . . Gordon, so sensitive, so tender and impressionable . . . Gordon must not see the dying dog.

I met him at the base of the hill, his innocent face shining with the heat; but not sunburned, I immediately thought thankfully. Even an hour in the hillside sun usually turned him pink—much more than that would blister him. Thank goodness he must have spent only a short time on the hill.

"Miss Laura," he cried, bright-eyed with delight that I had met him. Poor little kid, he did so need attention. He held up his microscope. "I've seen such wonderful things today."

"Yes," I said, "I am sure you have. Come on in where it's cool and I'll make you some lemonade."

His eyes shone as he jumped and hopped at my side as if his day had been so exciting he could not walk but must run, and inside the house he kept up a high-pressure chatter about the wonderful things he'd been viewing through his microscope. I only half listened, my mind instead forming its own microscope picture of the horrifying sight I had viewed such a short while ago. I kept seeing that pitiful blue dog with his blue tongue and his white upturned eyes in the lemons I squeezed, in the sugar I measured out, in the ice cubes I took from the tray. I smiled and nodded without hearing as I poured Gordon's lemonade and looked at the dying blue dog in the glass.

The hippies had done it. Trembling with rage, I turned to clean up the sink and dump the lemon

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rinds, looking out the window over the yards and at the shadowed open door of the shed. Of course they had done it, with the blue paint left over from the trim of their house. Oh, I was as sure of that as if I had seen them sneak out of the old barn behind their Victorian house where they parked their motorcycles and stored their leftover paint, to skulk

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along the base of the hill in back, carrying the paint and the brush . . .

"I'm glad you didn't stay long on the hill today," I said, my heart lurching with the abrupt fear that *since he didn't stay long, he must have seen something—the hippies with their blue paint—and the dog!* I whirled. "Gordon, when did you go up on the hill? How long were you gone?" He was staring, intently one-eyed, through the lens of the microscope trained on nothing but the tablecloth. "Gordon!" I called, thinking of the possibility that his hyperactivity, his excited chatter, might be a blind, a cover-up to block out of his child mind the terrible thing he had seen without understanding.

"Gordon," I said tensely, "how long were you down here in the yard?"

He looked up at last. "Why, Miss Laura, I went up on the hill as soon as you left and you know when I came down." I breathed a sigh of relief that caught in my throat. *Then why wasn't he sunburned after four hours on the hill?*

"I found a shady spot," he said, as if he had read my mind, and perhaps he had. I didn't know of any shady spot on a burned hill that was just beginning to grow again, but a child . . . well, a child makes discoveries unknown to adults.

I turned back to the sink to look out the window just in time to see Effie stumble from the shed, her shoulders slumped, one hand covering her face. She reached back and closed the door behind her.

The dog was dead.

Sickly, I saw the picture again of the blue dog, and I gagged. I had to make up a story so that an innocent child would not be marked forever by the knowledge of such an atrocity.

"Gordon," I said, turning once more. He was still bent obsessively over his microscope. "Gordon, the dog ran away."

He jerked up his head and stared at me, his face perplexed.

"He just ran away," I tried again lamely. "You know how he came here. He must have run away from somewhere else, and now he has run from here . . ."

Effie's step was heavy on the back porch, and Gordon turned toward the door, his face expectant.

She pushed open the door and walked in, the front of her dress streaked with paint, her arms smeared with it, her face blank and drawn, looking bruised with the shadow of blue. "He's dead," she said dully.

"Who is dead, Mother?" asked Gordon looking up at her, his voice trembling.

"The dog."

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"No!" I flew to his side and stooped before him so that my face was on a level with his. "He ran away, Gordon, just like I said. The dog ran away," but Gordon was watching his mother, not me.

"He is dead. He was painted to death." Then Effie said to me with resignation, "He knows."

"*Now* he knows." I was furious. Rising painfully to my feet, I looked down at the angel face, the princely head. "Oh, now he knows, now that you have told him."

"Mother," questioned Gordon, innocently wide-eyed, "how could the dog be painted to death?"

She was cold and still. She had aged ten years in the past half hour. "Lead paint," she said. "You know that. You're a smart boy. The dog was tied with the rope in the shed, and painted blue with lead paint. The lead, absorbed through his skin, killed him." Her voice was still, empty of emotion. I could feel the sickness rise in my throat as she talked, and pressed my fingers against my lips. "It took quite a while to paint the dog," she said, "as you probably know, and the painter must have been careful so as not to get any on himself. You are a neat boy, Gordon." Her face crumpled for an instant and stiffened again. "It took the dog hours to die. The paint was half dry. Where were you this afternoon, Gordon? Early this afternoon?"

"Effie!" I cried. "He was up on the hill. What are you saying? Gordon went up on the hill right after I left and came back down again just a while ago."

I looked down at Gordon, at his puzzled baby face. At least he didn't understand the accusation; at least he was spared the understanding.

I caught Effie by the shoulders. "The hippies killed the dog. You must know that. It was hippie paint from the trim on their house."

"Yes," she said. "It was their paint."

"So you must call the police. This is a terrible crime." I began to weep. "Call the police and get those hippies out of here. Away from Gordon."

Effie laughed without mirth, then her face became sad. "No," she said, "I cannot call the police." She moved toward the door, looking bereft and exhausted, paint-smeared and uncaring. "I must bury the dog," she said.

Gordon jumped up. "I'll help you, Mother."

She turned on him and snarled, "You won't touch that dog. Never again."

Effie buried the dog somewhere in the back yard in an anonymous grave. You'd think, her being so fond of him, she'd have put up some

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kind of marker, a wooden cross or something so she'd know where he lay—but no, she buried him and spread the soil flat, never mentioning him again, even during the next week when she carried traces of paint on her skin because some of it had to wear off, just as did the slight smear on the drinking glass Gordon had used that afternoon and which she must have touched while she was there.

The only time I became aware that she was still thinking of the dog was when she hired those workmen in the late fall to tear down the shed and leave the lumber in a small, sad pile at the back of the property.

After that, the way she acted about the steps—well, she didn't need to act that way. Gordon was only being thoughtful, and the lumber *was* there. I'm sure he didn't think about it being a part of the shed where the dog had died, and that his mother was grieving over the dog. What child, even a bright one, would realize all that? Or that his very own mother blamed him for the dog's death? Poor Gordon. He was only trying to gain her attention, and heaven knows he had less of it that fall than he'd had even before, what with her putting in all that overtime—two, three nights a week sometimes. On those nights, she'd come home and fix his supper, and then go right back to work.

"You can't leave Gordon alone in that house when you come in late," I said.

"Why not?" she asked.

Good grief, what a question! "It isn't *safe*."

"For whom?" she asked.

So I talked to Gordon about it. "I don't like to have you in that house alone at night. Remember, any time your mother finds she must go back to work after supper, I want you to be sure and come over here."

"Yes, Miss Laura," he said.

"And don't forget to use a flashlight to cross the yard, it gets dark so early now, and always bring pajamas just in case your mother doesn't get home until after your bedtime."

"Yes, Miss Laura."

Since Effie kept her garbage can on a cement slab right beside her back steps, I always knew when they'd finished supper. I was usually doing my own dishes about then, and through the window over my sink I could see when their back light went on, the way it shone out from the angle of the house, then went off again. It meant that Effie had just put out the garbage. If she were going back to work that night, Gordon's flashlight would come bobbing through the yards on his way to my house.

Those were delightful evenings!

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He'd do his homework, although he never had much since he was already so far beyond his sixth-grade class, then we'd watch the television programs that were suitable to his age, and talk. If Effie were later than nine-thirty, Gordon got into his pajamas and climbed into my guest bed. "I love it over here with you," he said fondly, and I told him how much I loved having him.

He was helpful too. Whenever I made candy or whipped up a cake, he always said, "Now I'll do the dishes, Miss Laura," and he'd do them well. If the night was right for a fire in the fireplace, he got the wood and started the fire. Such a precious child!

He was trying to help his mother that Sunday afternoon she brushed him off about the steps. I heard it because I was out in back covering the plants in case of a frost. He said, "Mother, those back steps are pretty rickety, maybe I can fix them for you," and she immediately turned her suspicious look on him to snap, "They aren't all that rickety."

"But you might fall sometime taking out the garbage," he said, and she said she wouldn't fall unless somebody made her fall. Now, really!

He said, "Maybe I can fix them so they'll be stronger," and she said, "I don't want you to fool with them."

Then he said, "There's all that lumber out back, Mother, I could use that," and she whirled on him like she was ready to bite and said, "Don't you touch that lumber!"

Well, it was too bad, all right, and I was certainly surprised when, the next day after school, I saw Gordon over in his yard busily hauling lumber from the back of the lot to the porch steps. I put on a sweater and went outside and called over, "Gordon, I thought your mother didn't want you to use that lumber," and he answered innocently, "Oh, she won't care if I get the steps fixed."

"I don't know," I called, "I thought she didn't think the steps needed fixing."

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"Sure they do, Miss Laura," he called back. "Heck, they're falling apart."

I didn't know that, but if Gordon said so, he was probably right. I went back in the house, thinking what a shame that a marvelous little kid like that had to work so hard to get his mother to pay attention to him, and when he did get her attention, it was all bad simply because he'd been born with an umbilical cord around his neck and his mother had this superstitious streak.

I called him in for hot cocoa a little while later when a cold drizzle started. He was rosy-cheeked and beaming, filled with plans for repairing those steps, talking about braces, treads and risers, and I couldn't tell him his mother would be furious because the lumber reminded her of a dead blue dog and her son reminded her of a curse. Good grief!

Effie arrived home from work about five o'clock in the evening, almost dark. By six, when they were finished with supper, I saw the back porch light flash on. It continued to shine, and it was longer than a few minutes later before I saw the bobbing flash through the dark yards.

I greeted Gordon at the front door with, "Your mother left her back light on."

"Oh, she hasn't left yet," he said. "She'll notice it when she turns off the kitchen light, though, surely."

We watched a travelogue on television and played Scrabble. I didn't once have to go into my kitchen, from where I could see into the next yard, for Gordon was particularly helpful that night. "If you want some tea, let me get it for you," he said once, jumping up. "I know how to make it." Another time he said, "I'll get my cake and milk. You sit still."

I thought the back light was off and the house was dark and that Effie had driven to work. I thought she was working longer that night when, at nine-thirty, Gordon said, "I've got my pajamas. I'll stay with you," and ran to the kitchen "to see that the back door is locked."

I go to bed early, ten or before, so when Effie worked I never heard her drive home and park at the curbing. I didn't hear her that night either, of course.

I arose at seven when, on a drizzling, early winter morning, it was still quite dark. I put the teakettle under the faucet, reaching with my other hand for the light switch over the sink, and held it there suspended for a moment while I looked out the window at the glow of Effie's back light. "Well, for heaven's sake, she forgot it," I murmured. I switched the light on, put the teakettle on the stove, hurried to the livingroom,

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pulled the drapes wide and peered through the dusk of morning, just able to make out the shadowed outline of her car at the curb.

"Well, she's home anyway," I assured myself, and went back to prepare breakfast, keeping one eye on the window over the sink.

Effie should have been up by then and in the kitchen, preparing her own breakfast, so she should have noticed the light outside. Maybe she had noticed it and was simply leaving it on until she was ready to take out the morning garbage; then she'd turn it off and go to work. She generally left about seven-thirty.

At seven-thirty, Gordon, washed and dressed, was in my kitchen eating breakfast. I stood at the sink, looking out the window at the back light, still on but fainter as the morning light grew through the drizzle.

"Your mother left her light on last night," I told Gordon.

He swallowed a mouthful of oatmeal and kept his eyes lowered as he spooned another bite. "Maybe she forgot," he said.

"She should have noticed by now and turned it off to go to work."

"Maybe she hasn't left yet."

I went back to the livingroom and looked out at the car at the curb, and returned to the kitchen. "My," I said, "you're hungry this morning," as Gordon left the stove with a second bowl of oatmeal.

He smiled. "You cook such good breakfasts," he said.

"I don't understand about your mother."

He looked up this time, his eyes wide and wondering. "What don't you understand?"

"Well, she hasn't left yet. And there's that light shining."

"Maybe she's late, and she'll turn it off before she goes."

"Maybe she's sick," I suggested.

"She didn't act sick."

"I'll go over with you before you leave for school if her car isn't gone by then."

"All right," he said, "let's go," and pushed back his almost full oatmeal dish, so even though he didn't appear to be, he was really concerned for his mother.

I put on a sweater and, together under my umbrella, we walked across the wet grass of the lawns and onto Effie's front porch. Gordon's key was under the mat. He unlocked the door, opened it and I called, "Yoo-hoo."

The house had the cold, damp feel of one whose furnace has been turned low for many hours. I shivered, and that's when I became aware of the wedge of light from the kitchen down the hall. "She's in the kitchen," I said, and walked down the hall with Gordon follow-

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ing. "Effie," I called. "You all right?"

There wasn't a sound. I stepped into a kitchen, neat and clean. No breakfast dishes. No smell of coffee. *She got up this morning,* I silently conjectured, *came to the kitchen to fix breakfast, decided she felt too rotten to eat and returned to bed without even bothering to turn off the light.*

Gordon hadn't said a word. I looked down at him. His face was blank. *Probably doesn't know what to make of it,* I thought.

"Run into your mother's room and see if she's there. I'll turn off the back light," I said.

He was off like a shot.

I walked through the neat kitchen, reached for the switch, then tried the door, found it unlocked, pushed it open—and saw Effie on the ground, her head against the lumber. I screamed.

I started to rush outside and was caught in the grasp of strong small hands. "No, Miss Laura," cried Gordon. "Don't step on that part of the tread." I looked down at him, his angel face helpful and worried. "This part," he said, showing me how to walk the middle-right of the six stairsteps to reach the bottom and Effie, lying in the mud of the night and morning drizzle, surrounded by soggy garbage, its paper wrapping torn and water-soaked, her dead face faintly blue in the sick electric light washed out by the morning.

I thought of the dead blue dog and gagged. Why did I think of the dead blue dog?

I heard a gasp. I reached down and whirled the child away from the sight of his mother and pushed him up the stairs—or did he pull me, safely to the middle-left going up? It was I who slammed the door.

His lip trembled. His eyes filled with tears, but he told me what had probably happened—that brave, strong, brilliantly deductive child, speaking low, his voice choked so that it was sometimes difficult to hear. He offered his deductions, quite clearly concise, though filled with emotion and separated by explanation gaps, so that I accepted with belief the conclusion that his mother had turned on the light the night before and stepped outside with the evening garbage, closing the back door behind her just as Gordon closed the front and started across with his flashlight.

"But it was a while," I said, "quite a while after the back light went on before I saw your flash come from the front of the house."

Gordon thought a moment, then said, "I remember. Mother turned the light on, then decided she had some more things she wanted to do before she took the garbage out.

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Yes, I remember that. I was just going out the front door, then, when she was finally ready to go out the back."

She had stepped on the first tread of the stairs, maybe the second, along the left-hand edge, that side being closer to the garbage can. "It's the way she always went," sobbed the heartbroken child. "I told her the steps were rickety, the nails all worn through on the other side."

The tread then tipped with her weight, to throw her off balance so that she fell, striking her head on the cement slab where the garbage can stood, or perhaps against the lumber piled so close.

"If we'd only seen the light last night," sobbed Gordon, "if we'd seen the light we'd have known something was wrong."

I said, "I stopped watching when I saw you coming across the yards. I didn't see the light again until this morning," and I took the poor orphan child in my arms to comfort him.

The police investigation recapitulated Effie's death almost identically with the way Gordon was sure it had happened. "Had to be like that," they said. "Look at this top step and the one below it," pointing out the empty holes on the right of the two treads going down, on the left coming up. "A little pressure here . . ." as one of the officers pressed the heel of his hand on the opposite end, tilting the unnailed end of the board, "and she dove."

"Where are the nails?" I asked.

"Old steps," he explained. "The nails drop out with time. So she hit the end of the tread just right and lost her balance. It was a deadweight fall with that sack of garbage in her arms. She landed headfirst on that pile of lumber as heavy as if someone had struck her with one of those two-by-fours."

"Too bad," they said of Gordon, alone now except for me. "Nice kid. They don't come along like that very often. Bearing up well, isn't he?"

"He's strong," I said, and remembered how his mother had told me, *He's a very strong child, just as evil is strong.*

"You say the kid wanted to fix the steps?"

"He said that's why he hauled that lumber from the back of the lot," I told the officer. "His mother didn't want him to do it."

"Probably didn't think the kid could. Probably underestimated him."

"No," I said. "She never underestimated him. Never that. She said the steps were all right."

"Well, they weren't all right. They killed her."

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"Something killed her," I said.

In time all the personal things were taken from the house and stored in mine. The lumber was piled at the curbing where Effie used to park her car, and later, taken away. A FOR RENT sign sprouted on the lawn where the dog once bounced a greeting.

"Now," said Gordon, "I can live with you all the time, Miss Laura."

"Yes," I agreed, smoothing his princely hair, touching his angelic face, feeling little pleasure and a strange lack of excitement at the thought of this child living with me. "We will have wonderful times together," I said absently.

I watched over his homework but he required no help, being far too smart, probably smarter than I. He beat me at Scrabble and learned to play chess. He brought in wood for the fireplace and cleaned my silverware. He was orderly, neat, helpful and mannerly, a joy to have around, but I was not joyous.

We celebrated Thanksgiving and Christmas: "The nicest holidays I've ever spent, dear Miss Laura," cried Gordon, looking like a medieval prince. "I am so glad I live with you." I smiled with some effort.

In February, at the beginning of the second term, Gordon's new sixth-grade teacher called on me. "Such a wonderful boy!" she enthused. "Just a prince of a child."

I agreed, impassively.

"So bright, so helpful, so beautiful and talented. But I worry about him."

I leaned forward. "Don't worry about *him* . . ."

"He's so alone. He doesn't mix with the other children. It would be better for him if he had friends."

"But not for them," I said.

He cleaned out my garage and put up hooks for the garden tools. He built shelves for my potting soil and insecticides. Since he began to rise earlier than I, he often had my coffee started and his cereal bubbling by the time I entered the kitchen in the mornings. In the evenings, he read my seed catalogs and gardening books and discussed, with animation, what we should plant and how to care for what we planted. He was truly a wonder, and I wondered about him somewhat anxiously.

The weather turned warm in the latter part of February and early in March. Gordon helped me turn the soil and drive the stakes and tie the string. Carefully, he planted seed in neat, straight furrows.

"I like to plant a garden with you, Miss Laura," he said, smiling enchantingly.

"Yes," I said patiently, "I know you do."

"You are very good to me, Miss

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Laura," he crooned. "*Very* good."

"And you are good to me," I answered hopefully, reaching out a hand but not quite touching his angel curls.

"I'll keep this garden perfect for you. I won't let an aphid, a weevil, a diabrotica, borer, slug or snail in it to eat your plants," he said gaily. "I'll kill them all, believe me," and I believed him.

"You can see that I've read all about these pests in your gardening books. I know their names and what they do and how to get rid of them." I was sure of that.

"I also read the directions on how to mix those insecticides in your garage. I read them very carefully when I built that shelf to put them on."

"I expect you did, Gordon," I said. "Don't help me with the garden, and stay out of the garage, Gordon."

"Why, Miss Laura?" His eyes were big and shiningly innocent. "Why don't you want me to help? And why must I stay out of the garage?"

"Because, Gordon. Because I say so. Stay *out* of the garage, please."

"Well, all right," he said sweetly. "If you say so, Miss Laura," without resentment, without rancor—gently considerate, always eager to please.

I don't suppose the padlock will keep him out of the garage and away from the insecticides, he is so clever. Anyway, maybe that isn't what was wrong with my coffee the other morning at all, maybe it was only ordinarily bitter. Just the same, I make my own coffee now and keep the garage padlocked, and look under the hood of my car before I drive it, just in case. I check the garden tools to see that they're all in place, especially the spading fork with its vicious tines and the hoe with the sharp edge.

It is barely possible that Gordon did not kill his father, burn the brush, paint the dog, murder his mother and now plans an end to me. It is slightly possible. However, I carry Effie's rabbit foot, turn my back on black cats and watch out for Friday the 13th, for I too think Gordon is cursed by the umbilical cord of his mother's beliefs which I have now inherited.

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There is more than one way, of course, to make a killing.

THE FIRST MAN I'd never seen before opened the car door, threw two well-filled sacks on the floor, slid in beside me and said, "Move!"

Stranger number two climbed in the back seat, shoved a gun in my ear and added, "Right now."

I don't fool around with old cars. I like them new and standard Detroit. The car we sat in was pure stock except for heavy-duty springs and shocks. The four-barrel carb and timing were set way up to insure maximum acceleration, which is what we got.

When I stepped on the gas, we jumped from the curb, picking up speed, almost clipping two cars, moving faster, past a stop sign, through a light, ignoring another stop sign, two more lights, then a full right turn at top speed and we were on the main and only road leading out of town, and my foot was all the way down to the floor. The car responded perfectly; we hit a hundred, going up.

The indicator read 110 and climbing when my back-seat passenger tapped me on the shoulder. "You can slow down now."

I checked the rear-view mirror. He sat stone still, looking very ill.

My seat mate wasn't taking it too well either. He stared at me and said, "Do you always drive like this?"

"No. Not really."

"You handle a car good—real good. You race?"

I laughed. "Me? Heck, no. That's for kids."

"Yeah, sure. And try not to run over any. Okay?"

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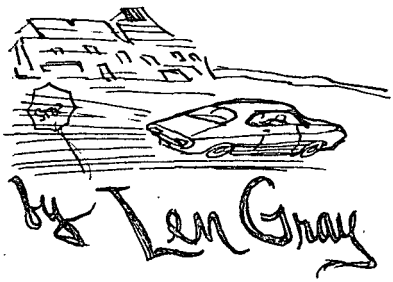
I nodded, concentrating on the road. Traffic was lighter than usual for this time of day; evidently the school kids and afternoon shoppers had gone home early.

I checked the rear-view mirror again. No one was following us.



The man beside me seemed happy about it. "Well, Bert," he said to his back-seat friend, "what did I tell you? Easy pickin's, right, baby?"

Bert, settling down now, laughed. "Beautiful, just *beautiful!*"

They went on for a few minutes and I learned the man in the front seat was named George. George specialized in old jokes, mostly bad ones. He broke off long enough to ask me my name.

"Terrell," I told him. "Johnny Terrell."

"What do you do, John?"

"Nothing right now. I'm out of work."

George patted the dash meaningfully. "Nice. Real nice."

I shrugged, keeping my eyes on the road. "The unemployment checks help keep up the payments. You know how it is."

"I sure do. Bert and I know exactly what you mean. Right, Bert?"

"And how," the other man agreed. "There's been times, not too long ago either, when we didn't have the price of beans. I tell you, somebody's gotta do somethin' about all this unemployment!"

George howled gleefully, kicking the sacks at his feet. "You said it, baby. And from now on, we can buy all the beans we want."

"You married, John?" George asked suddenly.

"Oh, no! I've never liked women very well; they cause too many problems. I kind of like to spend my time alone. I really don't have many friends, come to think of it."

"Don't worry about it, kid," George advised. "The way you drive a car you don't need any friends at all. In fact, Bert and I might be able to use you. It's possible. What do you think, Bert?"

I watched in the mirror for the other man's reaction. He seemed willing enough. "Why not? We sure could use a driver. Could we ever!"

George nodded. "John, what Bert means is we just held up a bank. That's what we do for a living—hold up banks. What do you think of that?"

I waited for a moment, then said, "Oh? Really?"

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"Uh huh—and we hit some of the big ones, too. Not all of 'em are small-time places. Right, Bert?"

"Right. But we're careful. Real careful. You keep peckin' at the big ones all the time and someday, somewhere, somebody's gonna be waitin' for you and shoot you full of holes. We don't need any holes, do we, George?"

George howled some more. He sounded like a puppy I used to own. "Only in our cheese, baby!"

They both laughed and I waited for them to stop so they could tell me about the places they planned to hit.

"All kinds of 'em. John," George said, winking at me. "And you're in luck."

"How's that?" I said.

"Easy. We need a driver—bad. You know the last holdup? From where we just came?"

"What about it?"

"Our car wouldn't start. Just like that, the thing gave up on us. There we sat in front of the bank in this stolen, stupid car and the alarm about ready to blow, along with my ulcer and Bert's toupee."

"I can see how that could be a problem," I said.

"Exactly," George said, grimacing. "Now, you may be the man to solve it. Bert and I *hate* cars. We've *always* hated cars. One time we almost got picked up in Dallas because our battery cables were corroded. Can you imagine that?" George seemed to find it incomprehensible.

So did I. If you went to jail because of corroded battery cables, you were in the wrong business. I said as much out loud.

Bert didn't disagree. "Yeah, you're right. But it isn't easy to find a driver. At least not a good one. George, tell him about Greenman."

Happy Greenman, George informed me, was a driver they'd used in the past. Over the years Happy acquired several bad habits.

"For one," George explained, "he never could get addresses straight. There was this time in Montana when Happy waited forty-five minutes for us to come out of a bank. There were two banks in town, only two of 'em, and Happy sat for forty-five minutes in front of the wrong one. Bert and I almost froze out there."

"That's not all," Bert told me. "Happy got lots of parking tickets. No matter where he parked, he picked them up. George and I came out of a job down in New Mexico and Happy was standing there shooting the breeze with some cop who was writing up a ticket. If *that* wasn't a mess and a half."

The two of them went on and on, talking about other drivers, equally incompetent.

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George eventually quit talking long enough to point with his finger. "Take that side road there."

The "road" he was talking about was little more than a dirt path, bordered by trees and dense brush. I turned off, guiding the car carefully over the rocky surface. My heavy-duty suspension took the ride nicely.

"Great driver," Bert complimented from the back seat.

"You're gonna come in handy," George added, patting me on the shoulder.

I finally saw where we were heading. I'd forgotten all about the old camping cabins out here. They haven't been used much since the new state park opened a couple of years ago.

George motioned to the first cabin on the left. "Park the car anywhere, John."

I angled the car to a stop in the middle of the road. When Bert got out, George handed him one of the sacks and started to open his own door. Hesitating, he leaned toward me, smiled, and took the keys out of the ignition. "Just playin' it safe, John. Why don't you wait right here for now?"

I nodded and watched him get out and walk to the cabin with Bert. They seemed to have a problem getting the cabin door open.

Reaching under the dash, I pulled out the spare key from its taped hiding place. I placed the key in the ignition.

George and Bert were standing there by the cabin door, directly in front of the car. The door was flush to the ground and there were no steps.

I turned on the ignition and floored the accelerator.

"Where the hell have you been?" my wife wanted to know.

She was mad and had every right to be. I'd taken off without her, and in our business that's sin number one.

"Harold," she said, using my real name, "do you have any idea what happened to me today? *Do you?*"

I smiled. "Yes. I think I do. But why don't you tell me about it?"

She did. As planned, she had gone into the bank, taken out the note and was reaching for the gun in her purse when the men arrived.

"Two jerks beat us to it, Harold! What do you think about that?"

I smiled.

"You know," she said, "I sometimes wonder if all this is worth it. What's in the sacks?"

I told her.

This time *she* smiled.

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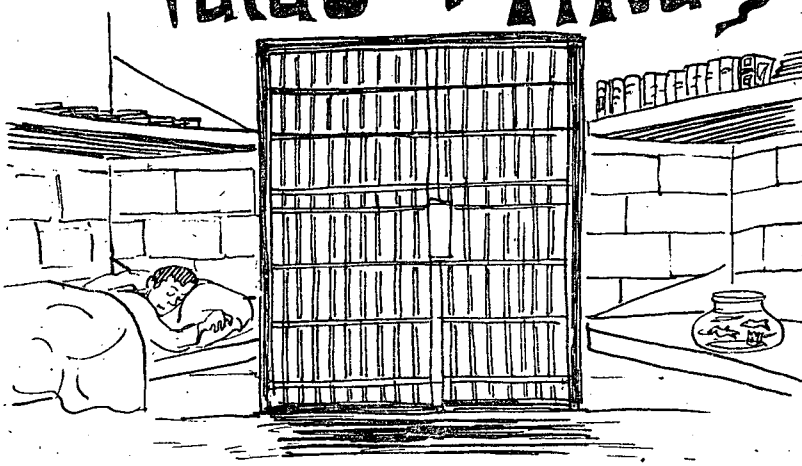
A certain community of thought has been known to instigate unprecedented results.

The Value of Privacy



I HAVE ALWAYS preferred a cell to myself. Most other prisoners regard such a situation as a punishment or a deprivation, but I place a great deal of value on privacy.

Not that my cell is designed specifically for a single occupant. Actually, it was intended for four. However, through good conduct, hard work, longevity, and considerable conniving, I had succeeded, until now, in reserving it for myself.

The larger cell grants me space for my goldfish, my limited—though excellent—personal library, and my collection of antique bookmarkers.

All of the wardens under whom I have had the honor to serve as per-

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sonal secretary have eventually adjusted themselves to my unique situation, or at least closed their eyes.

However, now I had a cellmate.

Mike Hegan went to the window bars again and glared out at the yard. "Damn it, I'm not afraid of any man out there."

I yawned slightly as I fed my goldfish. "The warden seems to feel that you are much safer staying right here in this particular cell."

Hegan snorted. "The hell with that. I'm ready to take my chances. Nobody scares me."

I had more than a slight suspicion that Hegan was attempting to convince himself as much as anybody else. We had been cellmates for a week now and during that time he appeared to have slept very little.

Until Hegan had been sent here, he had been a cop—a big, rough, tough cop who had put quite a few other people behind these walls, including—possibly—some innocents, since he had had a reputation for securing confessions, Miranda Decision or no.

Now he was just a con, like the rest of us.

I had read about his case in the newspapers in the warden's office. There had been a rash of thefts from the warehouses in Hegan's precinct and the police had seemed unable to solve or stop them. Finally, the local warehouse association, out of desperation—or possibly suspicion—secretly hired private detectives. A comprehensive investigation apparently bore fruit, for a raid upon Hegan's home, conducted by state officials, uncovered a potpourri of easily traceable loot neatly stacked in his basement, including twelve rolls of theater-aisle carpeting, thirty gallons of red barn paint, and ten cases of dehydrated onions.

I put the fish food back on the shelf. "What in the world does anyone do with ten cases of dehydrated onions?"

Hegan shrugged. "There are restaurants that ask no questions. They'll pay up to a third of the wholesale—" He stopped and glared at me. "I was framed. I didn't know the stuff was down there."

The 7:45 work bell rang and I stepped out of my cell onto the catwalk.

Hegan would remain in the cell all day.

Charlie Flannagan, one of the guards, took up his post just outside. He, or his relief, would stay there

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until I returned for the day at the five o'clock lockup.

Flannagan and I exchanged good mornings and then I joined the formation marching out of the cell block.

Outside, as usual, I was permitted to proceed on my own. I crossed the main yard to the Administration Building and went up to the warden's office on the second floor.

The warden, of course, was not yet in at that early hour. He would arrive at nine.

I arranged the day's paper work on his desk and then lit one of his cigars. I read yesterday's newspapers until a quarter to nine, after which I aired the room.

At the window, I watched Warden Hathaway step out of the large front doors of the three-story Victorian mansion. Our prison is one of the last which still contains the warden's residence within its walls.

He stopped for a few moments to chat with Orville Astin, his inmate gardener and grounds keeper, and then strode across the main yard to the Administration Building. He came into the office beaming. "Another beautiful day, isn't it, Powell?"

"Yes, sir. Mild and sunny. Only a ten percent possibility of any measurable precipitation."

Hathaway sat down at his desk. "You've been looking a little tired lately. Anything bothering you?"

I nodded. "My sleep has been somewhat sporadic since Hegan was put into my cell. It's his snoring, sir. Quite powerful."

Hathaway sighed. "I'm sorry, Powell, but you'll just have to learn to live with it. I know how you feel about your privacy, but I'm in a desperate situation. The prisoners have *sworn* to kill Hegan. Isn't that right, Powell?"

"I know absolutely nothing about that, sir."

He smiled wisely. "I've been in the prison system over thirty years and I *know* what the prisoners think and I *know* they're planning to kill Hegan. That's why I'm positive he'll be safest in a cell with *you*." He chuckled. "After all, we both know that you seem to exert a certain *influence* upon the other prisoners and I have the feeling that you would, shall we say, *forbid* anyone from killing Hegan while he is in your cell simply on the possibility that you yourself might be blamed for his death. Right?" He chuckled again.

"You already have him guarded when I'm gone from my cell, sir. Why couldn't you put him in a *single* cell and have him guarded *twenty-four* hours a day?"

Hathaway shook his head. "Do you realize how many hours there are in a week?"

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"I never really thought about it, sir."

"But *I* have. There are exactly 168. That would mean 168 *guard* hours per week to guarantee Hegan's safety, or a total time commitment of four and one-fifth guards." He shook his head. "You have no *idea* what a struggle I had with the legislature's Finance Committee in getting our last budget through. Imagine what the committee would say if it learned that I expended four and one-fifth guards just to protect *one* man? There certainly would be Old Ned to pay."

"Yes, sir. Old Ned. But couldn't you just transfer Hegan to another prison? At least that would remove the responsibility for his life from your shoulders."

"Unfortunately, this is the only prison our state has, except for the women's correctional institution. And even if I could swing it, I don't think he'd be any safer up there. I visited the place once and you wouldn't *believe* some of the women they've got committed."

At eleven o'clock, Thayer, the captain of the guards, came in somewhat breathlessly. "An attempt has just been made on Hegan's life, sir."

The warden quickly rose. "Is Hegan hurt?"

"Not a scratch. Orville Astin tried to stab him."

Hathaway blinked. "Orville? My gardener?"

"Yes, sir. He tried to get at Hegan with a pair of lawn-trimming shears. Luckily, however, he tripped over a hedge and Flannagan overpowered him."

"Where did all of this happen?"

"In your garden, sir. I felt that Hegan ought to be given some exercise and I thought he would be perfectly safe in your garden."

The warden agreed. "It would seem so. Who in the world would have suspected that Orville would try to kill him? Where is Astin now?"

"I've got him in solitary, sir."

In the afternoon, while the warden was in the dispensary conferring with the civilian director about medical supplies, I forged the necessary passes to get to Cell Block C.

Our solitary cells are rather small, with no view in any direction. However, they are clean, well-lighted, and the occupant receives exactly the same food as any other prisoner within these walls.

As usual, none of the guards went through the trouble of checking my pass. I really don't know why I bother to forge passes anymore. I suppose it's hard to break the habit.

I slid back the panel to Orville Astin's cubicle. He lay on the narrow bunk, hands clasped behind his head, smiling at the ceiling.

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"Orville," I said, "what the devil got into you, anyway?"

He sat up. "Is that you, Mr. Powell?"

"It is."

His smile broadened. "I guess everybody's talking about me now. Luckily for Hegan, I was overpowered at the last second."

"Orville, I am quite positive that you are not capable of murder."

He appeared a bit offended. "I killed my mother-in-law, didn't I?"

That was quite true. He had lethally skewered her with a shish kebab rod on an otherwise dull Sunday afternoon. His wife, forgiving him, has been waiting for his release these fourteen years, apparently unaware that he has turned down two paroles.

"I am speaking of cold-blooded murder, Orville," I said. "Hot-blooded murder is another thing. Besides, I know that you faint at the sight of blood."

"*My* blood, yes. Other people's, no. I'll bet no one ever expected that I would be the one to put the shiv to Hegan. Or nearly put the shiv to Hegan. They'll think of me as more than just a gardener from now on, won't they?"

I tried a guess. "According to the captain of the guards, Flannagan didn't exactly overpower you. He helped you up."

Orville's jaw became stubborn. "I was *overpowered* by Flannagan, and when I'm overpowered, I *know* I'm overpowered. Hegan was lucky to get away alive." He resumed his smile. "This whole thing ought to get me at least another five years, shouldn't it? Could you have someone send up my seed catalogs? And my organic gardening magazines?"

I gave up. "All right, Orville."

When I returned to my cell at lockup time, I found Hegan quite pasty-faced.

His voice broke slightly. "I suppose you heard about how somebody tried to kill me?"

I nodded. "Orville Astin. He wouldn't hurt a flea."

Hegan's eyes were somewhat wild. "Wouldn't hurt a flea? He had this great big dagger."

"Lawn-trimming shears."

"Dagger. It even looked like *two* daggers to me."

After lights out, Hegan didn't get to sleep until two-thirty in the morning. I knew, because that's when his snoring woke me.

I climbed down from my upper bunk and reached for Hegan with the intention of turning him over on his side. He leaped from his bunk with a shriek and went for my throat.

I had considerable difficulty in warding him off while I hastily reassured him that it was only me and that I had no intention of harming

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him. When I lay down again, it was some time before I was able to resume sleep.

At five o'clock Hegan began to snore again and woke me up. This time I decided that it might be wiser not to disturb him. I endured the noise until the six o'clock wake-up bell.

In the afternoon when I returned to my cell, I found Hegan sitting in the extreme corner of his bunk. "Don't go near the window, Powell. They might get you by mistake."

"Who might?"

"Those buzzards out there. They're all out to get me."

"How can anybody possibly get you in here?"

"Curare," he said darkly. "And a blowgun."

"How in the world would anyone in here get curare?"

Hegan laughed bitterly. "I *know* you cons. There isn't anything you can't get if you set your minds to it."

When Hegan's food tray was brought to him, he regarded it suspiciously. "How do I know this food isn't poisoned?"

I sighed. "You're letting your imagination run away with you."

His eyes narrowed. "All right, Powell, if you're so positive it isn't poisoned, eat half of it."

"I thoroughly dislike chili."

He rose menacingly. "Eat, damn it. Eat."

I suffered considerably from heartburn that night.

The next morning a new batch of prisoners was brought to the warden's office for the orientation interviews. Among them was Albert Lochenmeyer.

Lochenmeyer had been in and out of this prison all of his life. This time his stay was going to be permanent. He had just been convicted of killing the manager of a savings and loan office while in the commission of a robbery.

I got the opportunity to talk to him alone. "I hear they gave you ninety-nine years?"

Lochenmeyer shrugged. "I always knew I'd come here someday and never get out. Now the suspense is gone and I can relax. I hear you got Hegan as one of your guests now."

"That's right."

"And he's still alive?"

"Still alive."

Lochenmeyer grinned. "Actually I never ran across Hegan professionally. I got nothing against him personal, except that he was a cop. On the other hand, I just might do something about Hegan on general principles. After all, what do I have to lose?"

"That's right," I said. "What have you got to lose?"

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Yet ten days passed and Hegan remained alive, though considerably thinner and quite jumpy.

Dunlap, Sickels and I held our usual meeting in the library file room. Dunlap is the inmate in charge of the guards' mess, a position of great responsibility and opportunity. He is a rather rotund man, as befits his position. Sickels spends his workday wandering importantly around the prison power station with a slightly oily rag in the back pocket of his coveralls.

Most of the inmates refer to the three of us as the Executive Committee, a position to which we have not been elected, but grown.

We are the exponents of peace, order, light, and tranquillity, ever ready with a guiding hand for the inmate—or occasionally the guard—who might be confronted with some little problem which he felt was not quite important enough to trouble the official prison administration.

Dunlap carefully cut the pint of strawberry ice cream into three equal sections and passed around the plates and silverware.

Sickels got to the point of the meeting. "Hegan's been here almost two weeks now and he's still alive. Nobody's even made a try at him, except for Orville. But we can't really count that, can we?"

Dunlap delicately spooned ice cream to his lips. "Everybody *talks* about killing Hegan, but nobody seems to want to do it. Do you suppose they're intimidated because Hegan's in your cell, Powell?"

I didn't think so. "If anybody really wants to kill Hegan, it would have been done by now. Let's face it, if Hegan hasn't been killed by now, he never will be."

Dunlap nodded gloomily. "But something's *got* to be done. We have a cop who's responsible for dozens of our people being in here and he's still alive. It's disgraceful."

Sickels agreed. "How long do you think a man like Hegan would last in Leavenworth? Or San Quentin? Or Soledad?" He laughed dryly. "Not twenty-four hours. Forty-eight, at the most. We'll be regarded as Hickville, U.S.A. if something isn't done about Hegan and done right away. I think that our people are looking at us, the Executive Committee, to *do* something."

Dunlap regarded him speculatively. "Are you suggesting that one of *us* dispose of Hegan?"

Sickels backed up. "My trade is breaking and entering. I wouldn't know what to do with a knife, or whatever."

Dunlap had his excuse too. "Embezzlement is my speed. I can't even read an obituary without feeling faint."

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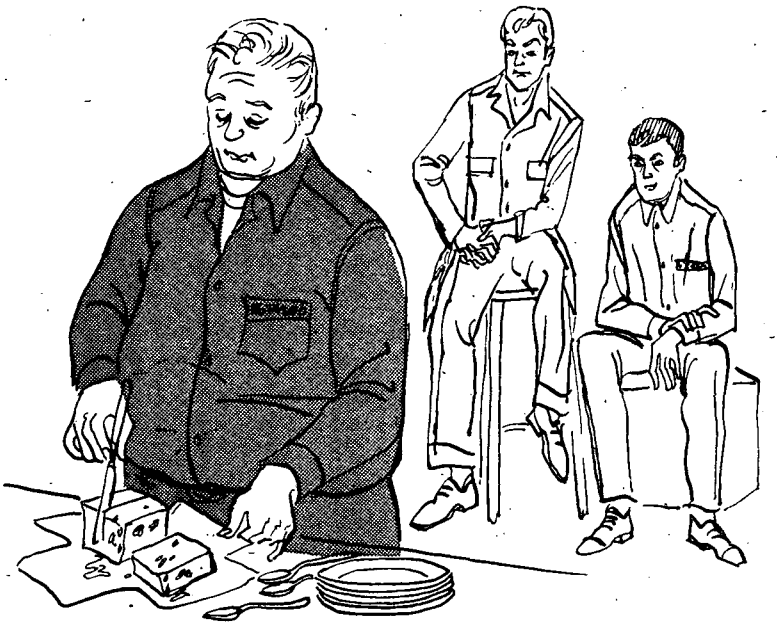

They regarded me quizzically.

It is true that I somewhat remotely qualify as a torpedo. A considerable time ago I accepted two thousand dollars to eliminate one Lefty Schroeder, but the liquidation of Lefty represented the length and breadth of my career. Unfortunately, while fleeing the scene of the crime, I had the ill luck to run my stolen auto into a sedan occupied by four off-duty policemen on their way to a bowling alley.

I smiled. "I am a machine-gun man. A specialist. If you provide me with a machine gun, I'd be more than eager to dispose of Hegan."

Obviously we had no machine gun.

Sickels finally broke the silence. "Why don't we *hire* someone to kill Hegan?"

Dunlap brought up a salient point. "What kind of an inducement could we possibly offer? Certainly not money."

Sickels pointed to his dish. "I was thinking in terms of *ice cream.* I mean that here we have every in-

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mate getting only three pints of ice cream a year—on Thanksgiving, on the Fourth of July, and on Christmas. Have you ever seen *anybody* turn down his pint of ice cream?"

Actually, of course, the Executive Committee manages, through Dunlap's position in the guards' mess, to secure ice cream considerably more than three times a year. However, we regard this simply as a just recompense for our burdens of responsibility.

Sickels came to the point. "Why don't we offer the man who kills Hegan a pint of ice cream every month for the next year?"

I frowned thoughtfully. Sickels might have something there at that. What might seem of trifling importance on the outside could assume tremendous proportions inside the walls. I have seen men beat each other into insensibility disputing the ownership of a pack of chewing gum. What wouldn't they do for a pint of ice cream every month for an entire year?

Dunlap remained dubious. "Who would kill a man for twelve pints of ice cream?"

"Somebody who has nothing to lose if he gets caught at it," Sickels said. "And we have plenty of those in here."

Yes, we had plenty of those in here.

Twelve pints of ice cream, and the embarrassing existence of Hegan would be terminated.

Dunlap beamed. "We'll circulate the offer as soon as we adjourn the meeting."

On the way back to the warden's office, I took a shortcut through the laundry building. I came upon Albert Lochenmeyer in the sorting room.

Here was a man who obviously had nothing to lose. It was true that he hadn't made any try at Hegan on his own initiative, but I suspected that this was primarily because he really hadn't much of an incentive, not even knowing Hegan personally—but for twelve pints of ice cream?

"Albert," I said. "Do you like ice cream?"

He looked up from the long table. "Sure. Why?"

I hesitated. Suddenly I felt distinctly uneasy about the whole thing. "Just curious," I said hastily. "I'm making a survey for the commissary staff."

I moved on. Damn it, Lockenmeyer would find out about the offer soon enough—from Dunlap or Sickels.

That evening in the mess hall, Dunlap, Sickels, and I took our usual tacitly reserved seats. We became engrossed in our plates of cabbage, meat balls, and stewed tomatoes.

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Finally I looked up. "I imagine both of you have been spreading the word of our offer?"

Sickels carefully cut in half a meat ball, which was mostly rice. "Haven't had the time. Been kind of busy today. One of the generators in the powerhouse just doesn't sound right to me and I'm trying to find the trouble."

Dunlap picked at his food. He had eaten earlier in the guards' mess, of course, but he had to go through the motions here. "I've been up to my elbows in work. Just haven't had the time to talk to anybody."

I sighed. So they had been thinking it over, too?

If we only had five thousand dollars at our command, we would cheerfully offer it all for the death of Hegan. But twelve pints of ice cream? Even for the life of a man like Hegan? Somehow it just didn't seem quite . . . *right.*

Dunlap and Sickels now looked at me.

I cleared my throat. "I think we ought to table our offer of the ice cream for further study."

They brightened.

"That's right," Sickels said happily. "Further study."

When I got back to my cell, I found Hegan—as usual, recently—huddled in the bottom bunk. He had lost some twenty pounds since he had joined me, and the circles under his eyes had become quite deep.

That night when I lay down, I tossed and turned. I was beginning to have my own difficulties in sleeping, even while Hegan was still awake with his fear-inspired insomnia.

Finally, however, I dozed off. At three in the morning, Hegan's snoring woke me. Grimly I lowered myself from my bunk and stared down at him.

How does one go about strangling a person? Is there much of a struggle? Is it absolutely imperative that you be bigger and stronger than your victim, or would the element of surprise be enough? If I suddenly pounced . . . ?

No. That would never do. Too clumsy, too barbarian, and besides, I might fail.

I climbed back up to my bunk and stared at the ceiling.

Curare?

Was it actually possible to secure curare? Or if not that, then a workable substitute? I knew that some of the inmates working in the dispensary had chemistry backgrounds. Would they be able to come up with something?

Just a drop in Hegan's bloodstream would do. Perhaps if I placed an impregnated needle in his shoe?

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Or possibly I might even use a blowgun from a distance?

I wiped away some of the perspiration from my forehead.

Or should I wait just a little longer in the hope that someone else might finally get the nerve to kill Hegan?

Suppose no one ever did? How long could I endure Hegan's snoring?

I joined Hathaway at the window.

It was late fall now and the cold wind scuttled leaves across the main yard.

The warden puffed his cigar. "So Hegan was framed after all."

"Yes, sir," I said. "I suppose he'll go back to his police job?"

Hathaway frowned. "No. Actually, he seems to have lost all interest in police work. I had a rather amazing private talk with him and he seems determined to travel. When I asked him where he intended to go, he clammed up, almost as though he were afraid to let me, or anyone else, know exactly where to find him. Frankly, he seemed like a thoroughly frightened and bewildered man."

We watched as Hegan and his escort moved toward the main gate complex. Hegan had acquired the habit of looking back over his shoulder as though expecting to see something or someone following him.

"Well," Hathaway said, "there he goes, out into the world again. I just don't understand it, though. Why would Lochenmeyer come forward and confess that he framed Hegan? I know he hasn't got anything to lose, but what did he have to *gain*?"

I smiled.

This afternoon I'd have to go over to the guards' mess and talk Dunlap out of a pint of ice cream.

Lockenmeyer had twelve of them coming, one for each month of the next year. They were the reward I had promised him for manufacturing the confession.

It was our little secret; just his and mine.

I yawned slightly. Tonight I finally ought to be able to get a full night's sleep again.

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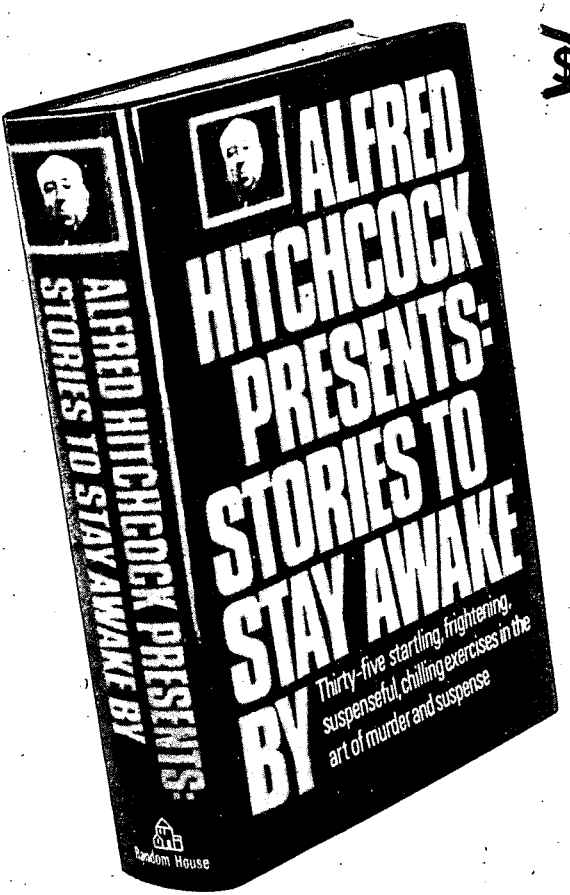
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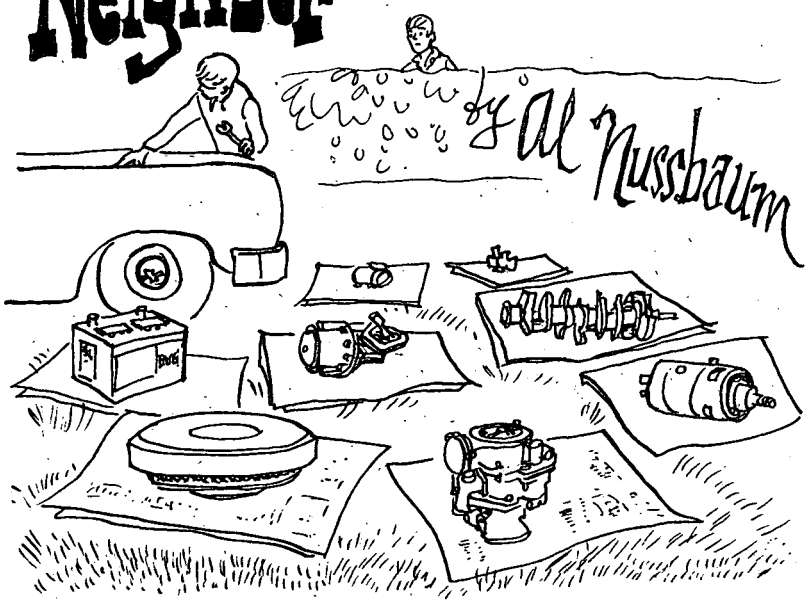
The knack of disassembly is one thing—but knowing what to do with the parts is quite another.

The Unfriendly Neighbor

by Al Nussbaum

WHEN I SAT DOWN at the breakfast table today, my wife had the morning newspaper folded beside my plate as she always did. I took a sip of coffee, then opened the paper to the first page and got the shock of my life. There, staring back at me, was a picture of Elmer Sesler. I read the accompanying article and couldn't keep from laughing.

"What's so funny?" my wife asked.



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"It's a long story, honey. It began twenty years ago." Then I told her about Elmer Sesler . . .

I was a freshman in high school when the Seslers moved in next door. There was just Elmer, who was my age, and his parents. His father, who was a minor executive with an insurance company, had been transferred to our city to work in the local office.

Elmer had stood out immediately, and not because of his jug-handle ears or freckled face. He had his own car. Few seniors had cars, but here was a lowly freshman who not only had a car, he had one that was almost new. A couple of guys tried to throw sour grapes on the situation by saying the car was probably his father's, but I put a stop to that.

"His father drives this year's model," I said. "That one's his, all right."

If anyone was unconvinced, Elmer's actions soon convinced them. He began to take the car apart. One day he'd arrive at school with the hood and trunk lid missing; the next day the doors might be gone. After the first few days, no one ever saw that car completely assembled again. The car *had* to be his. No one could get away with treating his father's car that way.

On evenings and weekends I'd look across the hedge that divided our back yards and see him tinkering with his car or working on something else in his garage. He had a workbench set up and far more tools than I could name. One time he had his car's engine completely disassembled and scattered across the ground with each separate part resting on a piece of clean newspaper. Other times he was hovering over an old TV and a vacuum cleaner he had spread out on his workbench. He seemed to have an insatiable curiosity and a genuine talent for taking things apart.

If it hadn't been for his car, however, he'd have been a social failure. He had all the tact of a kick in the teeth. He always ignored me when he saw me watching him, even though he must have recognized me from school where we had several classes together. Finally I spoke to him, and he walked over to the hedge.

"Yes?" he said in a flat tone.

"I'm Bill Ford," I said, reaching across the hedge to shake hands.

He ignored my hand and kept a level stare on me until I pulled my arm back in confusion.

"Just because we're neighbors doesn't mean you can ride to school in my car," he said.

"Who said anything about riding to school in your car?" I demanded. "*I* didn't say anything about your

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old car, or about riding in it."

"No, but you were thinking about it," he said.

He turned his back on me and returned to the garage where he had a washing machine torn apart on the cement floor.

I stood there for several minutes, shaking with anger. My fury was all the more intense because he'd been right. I *had* been thinking about how convenient it would be to have a ride to school, instead of having to walk the fifteen blocks every morning.

It turned out I wasn't the only one he accused of having designs on his car. He accused almost everyone, but apparently I was the only one who hated him for it. Perhaps because he was wrong about them, the other kids at school were able to laugh it off, while I resented having my mind read.

From then on I belittled everything Elmer Sesler did, and never passed up a chance to attack him verbally. Though everyone else seemed to consider him some kind of budding, eccentric genius, I made it clear I thought he was just a lunatic.

"He might even be dangerous, the way he thinks everyone is trying to use him," I said. "Just because he can take things apart doesn't mean he's a genius. I see him in his back yard every day, and half the stuff he tears into never does get back together. Take his car, for example—it doesn't look or run as well as it did before he started messing with it."

Nothing I said, though, had any effect. As far as the other students were concerned, Elmer Sesler was going to be famous someday. He was voted the most likely freshman to succeed, while I was given the wet blanket award.

Then, after that one year, Elmer's father was transferred to another city, and I never saw or heard of Elmer again . . .

"So what was so funny in the newspaper?" my wife asked. "Did he invent something?"

"No, he didn't invent anything," I said, "and I guess it's really not very funny. Elmer Sesler murdered his wife. The police found her body in Chicago, and Detroit, and Cleveland, and Buffalo."

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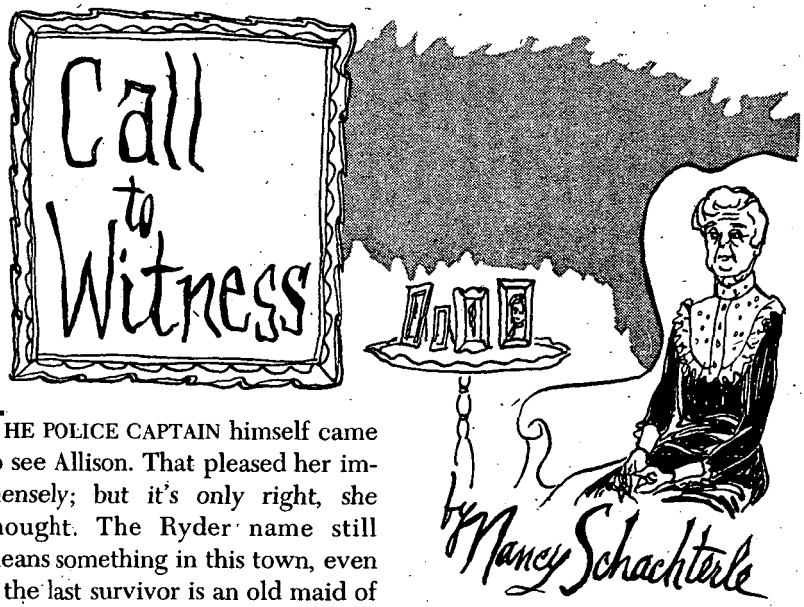
Fate has a way of knocking on one's door at the most opportune moment.



THE POLICE CAPTAIN himself came to see Allison. That pleased her immensely; but it's only right, she thought. The Ryder name still means something in this town, even if the last survivor is an old maid of eighty-three. Secretly she had been afraid that she had been in the backwater of age for so long that most people, if they thought about her at all, had decided that she must be long since dead.

Everett Barkley, he told her his name was. He was tall and well-built, filling his uniform to advantage, with little sign of the paunch that so many men his age allowed to develop.

Barkley helped himself to her father's big leather chair, slumping comfortably to accommodate his frame to its rump-sprung curves. Allison started toward a straight-backed chair suited to the erect posture of her generation, then yielded to the pleading of well-aged bones and lowered herself carefully into her familiar upholstered armchair.

The policeman surveyed the pie-

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crust table at his elbow, laden with silver-framed photographs. Gingerly he reached out and picked up Dodie's picture.

"Mrs. Patrick. She must have been very young when this was taken."

"Nineteen. She sat for that four years ago." And she had watched, not an hour ago, Allison recalled, as they carried Dodie to the ambulance with a blanket entirely covering her.

"Did you know her well? As you probably know, I've been in town less than a year and I had never seen her before the . . . before this morning."

Allison shuddered slightly. Automatically her hand went to her lap to caress Snowball, to seek comfort in the warm, silky fur, and the pulsations of the gentle, almost silent, purr. With a start she remembered that she had let him out in the early hours of the morning, and he hadn't yet returned. Worry nagged at her.

What had Captain Barkley asked? Yes—about Dodie. *Did I know her well?*

"She came toddling up my front steps one day when she was about two, and we've been fast friends ever since. At that time she lived just up the hill, in the next block."

"And since they were married they've lived next door to you?"

"That's right."

"Miss Ryder . . ." The policeman shifted his position, slightly ill at ease. "Would you tell me something about Dodie? Anything you like. Just your mental picture of her."

Allison reached to take the photograph from him. "This shows her spirit well, those laughing, sparkling eyes. She was a happy girl. She used to come running up those steps—she never walked, always running—and she looked so full of life. Vital is the word that comes to my mind. Dancing, tennis, swimming, golf, singing—that was Dodie."

Allison looked down at the gray old hands that held the picture, with their knotted veins and their liver spots. Dodie had been the youth she herself had lost.

"I can see her right now, sitting on the porch railing, swinging those long, tanned legs. 'Frank finally asked me to the dance, Miss Ryder,' she told me. She was leaning so far out to look down the street that I was afraid she'd fall into my Sweet William. 'Here he comes now. 'Bye. See you.' And she was gone, laughing and waving to him."

She had been pleased about Dodie and Frank, Allison remembered. All she knew of Frank Patrick was a dark, good-looking boy with a quick grin and a cheery wave. She didn't know then that he

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was one of those helpless, hopeless creatures who feed on hurt. His charm swept people like lilting dance music. Then, when they were dizzy from his gift of pleasure with themselves, he launched his barb and sucked at the wound. As his victims shriveled, Frank swelled with a grotesque satisfaction. Given the choice between kind and cruel, legal and illegal, moral and immoral, he'd rather go the lower path each time.

Allison handed the picture back to Captain Barkley. Carefully, he placed it back among the dozen or so others that crowded the little table.

"Nieces and nephews, and their children," Allison remarked. "I even have one great-great," she told him, with visible pride. "But Dodie was closer to me than any of them."

The policeman shifted his cap between his fingers in a broken, shuffling motion as if he were saying the rosary on it.

"Miss Ryder," he said, lifting his eyes to meet hers, "it'll be out soon, so I might as well tell you, the doctor is virtually certain it was an overdose, probably of her sleeping pills. We'll know for sure after the autopsy. What I'm trying to do now is get a picture of her, of her husband, of her life. Now, the Patrick house and yours are very close, can't be much more than fifteen or twenty feet apart, and their bedroom is on this side. I noticed the window was open about eight inches at the bottom. Knowing how easily sound travels on these warm, summer nights, I wondered . . ." He paused, waiting for Allison to volunteer the ending to his sentence. She was wearing a look of polite attention, but said nothing.

"Well," he continued, "I just wondered whether you might have heard anything."

Absently Allison's hand reached again for Snowball's head. Where could he be? She had heard him yowling his love songs on the back fence about three this morning, so she knew he was near home. Then she shook herself, mentally, and tried to remember what the officer had been saying. Oh, yes. *Did I hear anything?*

"My bedroom is on the far side of the house from the Patricks'. I'm afraid I can be of no help to you, Captain . . . Barkley, isn't it?"

Allison shrank into herself a little, half-expecting a bolt of chastening lightning from above. But she hadn't lied, she decided. Her bedroom was indeed on the far side. She needn't tell him that most nights she didn't sleep well, and it was cooler out on the screened porch, practically outside Dodie's open window.

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Barkley nodded, musing. "I understand Mrs. Patrick was a complete invalid for the past couple of years. Can you tell me anything about that?"

Allison sat a little more upright, legs crossed at the ankles and hands quiet in her lap. Absurdly, a seventy-year-old picture flashed into her memory of the class at Miss Van Renssalaer's Academy for Young Ladies absorbing the principles of being prim and proper. What did any of it matter now, she wondered, after all these years? It was people, and what they did to each other, that mattered. Dodie, too, had gone to a private school, and see what happened to her.

"She went out driving by herself one night," she told Barkley, "and . . . had an accident. Her spinal cord was crushed, and she was paralyzed from the waist down."

Allison remembered that night much too clearly. The stifling heat had been emphasized by the heartless cheerfulness of crickets. About eleven o'clock, Allison had prepared a glass of lemonade for herself, and moved to the old wicker lounge on the screened porch. It seemed cooler with the light off, so she sat in the dark, sipping the tart drink and resting. At first the voices had been muted, simply alto and baritone rhythms, then they had swelled and she caught phrases rising in passionate tones. Finally, there was no effort to hush their voices, and Dodie's anguish had cried across the night to Allison: "She's going to have your baby, and you expect me to be calm? How could you betray me so, and with a . . . a creature like that?"

Frank's voice had resounded with mocking laughter. "You can't be that much of an innocent! Do you honestly think your simple charms could be enough for a man like me? Susie wasn't the first, and you can be damned sure she won't be the last. Come on, now, Dodie. You're a sweet kid, and your family's been real helpful in getting me where I want to go, but you just can't tie a man down."

Allison cringed, remembering Dodie's wounded cry. It had been followed by the slam of the screen door, then footsteps pounding across the porch and down the steps. The car door slammed and the engine roared to life. Gravel spurted as Dodie took off into the darkness.

Only Dodie knew whether the smashup truly was an accident. Perhaps she had simply tried to numb the pain with speed—but she had been twenty-one and she never walked again.

The policeman cleared his throat. "Miss Ryder?"

"Yes?"

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"I hope you'll excuse me for asking you so much about your friends and neighbors, but you see . . . well, it's all going to come out eventually, and I'm sure you'll be discreet. There are only three possibilities to account for Mrs. Patrick's death. Crippled as she was, she had no access to the supply of sleeping pills. They were kept in the bathroom and her husband gave them to her whenever she needed them. It may be that she hoarded her pills, hiding them from her husband somehow, until she had enough for a lethal dose, and took them herself. Or, it could be that Mr. Patrick was careless—criminally careless—and she received an accidental overdose. Or . . ." and he paused, while Allison's eyes searched his. "Well, you realize, we must consider the possibility . . . perhaps the overdose wasn't accidental. Mr. Patrick wouldn't be the first man burdened by a crippled wife who took the wrong way out."

"Captain Barkley," Allison said. "There was no reason in the world for Dodie to kill herself. What does Frank say happened?"

"He insists she must have taken them herself. According to him she suffered a great deal of pain. He claims she must have saved up the sleeping pills, which rules out any chance of an accident. This is why I wanted to talk to you. You were very close to Mrs. Patrick. Was she in much pain?"

Allison's fingers unconsciously pleated the plum-colored fabric of the dress over her lap. Her head went a little higher, and an imperious generation spoke through her.

"I have already told you, there was no reason in the world for Dodie to kill herself. To my certain knowledge she was seldom, if ever, in pain. In fact, I can give you the names of three or four ladies who could confirm that fact, out of Dodie's own mouth. We'd often gather on the Patricks' front porch in the afternoon, so Dodie could be part of the group, and not a week ago we were discussing that case in the papers—you remember, the man who shot his wife because she was dying of cancer? Dodie was most upset. She was a dreadfully sympathetic child. She was torn between her distress at his immoral action and her sympathy with his concern for his wife's suffering. 'Perhaps I might judge differently,' she said, 'if I were in pain myself. I'm one of the fortunates, suffering only from the handicap. But even if I were in pain, I don't believe that anyone but God has a right to take a life.' The other ladies will bear me out on this, Captain."

Yes, she said to herself, we were discussing the case. Maybe nobody

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else noticed, it was so skillfully done, but Dodie herself was the one who maneuvered the conversation around to mercy killing. *I didn't know then, Dodie, but I can see now what you were doing.*

"Mrs. Patrick said herself that she was in no pain? Ever?"

"At the time of the accident, and for several months afterward, yes, she did have pain. But not recently. I never once heard her complain."

There now, Allison, she realized, you did tell a lie; you can't wiggle out of that one. The same night as that get-together you told him about, remember?—and Sunday night—and last night. . .

The scene had been the same all three nights, and the script had followed the same lines. Allison had been in her comfortable corner on the porch, Snowball's faint purrs pulsing against her caressing hand, the creaking wicker of the lounge cool against her bare arms. That first night it had rained earlier, breaking the heat, and the lilac leaves had whispered wetly to each other in the dark. Gentle dripping from the eaves seemed to deepen the quiet, rather than break it. Dodie's blind had been pulled down only to the level of the raised window. The muted voices were carried across to her by the force of their intensity.

"Please, Frank! Please!" Never had Allison heard such pleading in Dodie's voice.

"I've told you, I just can't," he'd said. "If the pain's so bad, let me get a shot for you, or something. But you don't know what you're talking about, wanting to kill yourself."

"What good am I to anybody like this? And the pain—I just can't stand it anymore." Her voice had risen with a startling anguish.

Allison, listening in spite of herself, had held herself tense, wondering. Just that afternoon Dodie had denied pain, yet now . . . Hot tears had welled in Allison's eyes as she listened to the tortured voice.

If she hadn't hated Frank so much for what he had done to Dodie, she might have been able to pity him, as his voice broke with indecision. "Dodie, I can't do it! Don't ask me to. Even if you're ready to die, think of the position you'd put me in. They'd say I killed you. Think of me, Dodie! They'd give me the chair!"

The argument had gone on. Three different nights Dodie had hammered away. Then last night, while Allison, hypnotized, watched the shadows shifting on the drawn blind, Dodie had played out her drama. She had won. Frank gave her the pills.

Allison had no longer felt the heat of the night. Chilled with hor-

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ror, she had fought her own battle. Her throat had throbbed with a scream to that silent window. She couldn't let Dodie do this! But a thin hand to her lips cut off that scream before it sounded. What right did she have to interfere? Dodie must hate with an unsuspected fury to die for her revenge. She wouldn't thank Allison for stopping her now.

Allison had sat quietly. Soon the Patricks' light went out. Only then did she rise stiffly and plod to her bedroom, where no one could hear her poorly stifled sobs.

The white cat had followed her to the bedroom. One soft, easy leap settled him beside the tired, sorrowing old lady. Allison remembered the day Dodie had brought him to her.

"Frank says he's allergic to cats, Miss Ryder. He won't have one in the house. But he's such a darling!" The vibrant face had gone quiet, as she crooned over the kitten. "Snowball'd be a good name, don't you think? If you kept him, I could see him often. I could help groom him, and things. It wouldn't hurt so much if I knew you had him."

So Allison had kept Snowball, but Dodie had never visited him in his new home. The accident came only days later. That's what Allison resolutely called it, although she was very much afraid it was something else. Through those harrowing days the kitten grew, and comforted Allison. He was full-grown by the time Dodie left the hospital.

Please come home, Snowball, Allison begged in her heart, forgetful of the waiting policeman. I need you so. There's not much left for an old lady. I had Dodie and I had you. Now Dodie's gone. Snowball, don't you know how much I need you?

A tear that couldn't be restrained by a lifetime of self-discipline slipped down the wrinkled, gray cheek.

Captain Barkley, tactfully clearing his throat again, brought Allison back to the present. This policeman and his questions! Allison was weary. Please, no more decisions . . .

Barkley hoisted himself out of the deep leather chair. "Well, Miss Ryder, I think you've told us what we need to know. One thing—when you get the chance, could you just write down the names of those other ladies you mentioned, who heard Mrs. Patrick say she suffered no pain? I won't trouble you now. I'll send a man by later today for it."

Dodie wins, Allison thought, but she felt no elation. Yes, Frank had killed Dodie, killed her youth and killed her innocence, and pummeled her spirit until she wanted to die. Yet, did Dodie, or did Allison,

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have the right to sentence him? Heedless of the waiting policeman, Allison closed her eyes momentarily, yielding to the grief that closed around her like a gray fog. Dodie was gone—but Allison didn't have to decide. All she had to do was let things go ahead without her, and all those other people would have to decide.

Allison struggled out of her chair. Captain Barkley rushed to help her, but she waved him aside. "Thank you, young man, but I have to do things by myself nowadays."

Yes, Allison, she mused, you have to do things by yourself. Once you make this decision, don't fool yourself that somebody else sent Frank to the electric chair. They still execute murderers in this state, you know, and, rightly speaking, Frank did not murder Dodie. For eighty-three years you've known right from wrong. You've faced up to truths, whether you liked the result or not. Now . . .

"Captain . . ." she started. Then her taut nerves jerked her like a marionette as the doorbell shrilled.

"I'll get it," the policeman offered.

It was another policeman, a close-shaven young man too big for his uniform, who bobbed his head respectfully to her, then turned to the captain. "Morrison says to tell you they're all finished over there, any time you're ready to go back to the station."

Captain Barkley glanced in speculation at Allison. Her expression told him nothing.

"I'll be out to the car in a minute." He held the door open for the younger man.

"Oh, and I thought I'd mention that we don't have to worry none about that big white cat the neighbors said was yowling early this morning. We found it in the Patricks' trash can. Somebody'd wrung its neck."

The captain nodded and turned back toward Allison where she stood by her overstuffed armchair, one hand lightly touching the back for support. Dodie smiled at him from the piecrust table.

"You were about to say . . . ?"

Allison reached to pick a white cat hair off of the chair beside her. "Yes . . . I was going to say I'll start on that list you wanted right away. You can send someone over for it in about half an hour. Good morning, Captain."

Head erect, shoulders straight, she shuffled resolutely across the room to close the door behind him.

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Many a lid has capped a stew—until the pot boiled over.

Lulu

ONCE IN A WHILE I get wistful about the days when Havana was still the pearl of the Caribbean and American-flag passenger ships had not yet become as ghostly as the Flying Dutchman, and then I start thinking about the crazy lengths to

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which a guy will go in order to save his neck.

Mullen was chief of the *Quetzal* when I was second. While in New York prior to that hair-graying last voyage with him, I sat in the radio room waiting for him to return with word on a new third operator. Mullen, for a reason the big-eyed fox had kept from me, had made life miserable enough for the last third to make him quit. I was hoping we wouldn't get stuck with some "lid" right out of radio school and about as good at operating as a one-armed sailor at shinning up a rope. I wasn't too optimistic. The federal radio laws required an operator to have at least six months of sea experience before being allowed to serve as the lone operator of a freighter, and the favored method of gaining that experience was to sail as junior operator on American passenger ships. With these rapidly joining galleys in oblivion, the job was at a premium, especially to a guy like Mullen.

Mullen came back, flopped his big, flabby carcass into the radio-room chair and groaned.

"Is he as hopeless as all that?" I queried dolefully.

"It's a she," said Mullen, staring at nothing with his big onion eyes. "A first-tripper."

"You have to be kidding. A girl!"

Mullen moaned. "A female. I won't go beyond that."

I'd heard of girl radio operators kicking around somewhere, but never bumped into one. "What's my wife going to say about me sharing my cabin with a—a female?"

Mullen sat up and laughed like a lunatic. "One look at her and your wife will insure you against jumping overboard. But she won't have to. Our new third is to have a passenger cabin with private bath all to herself, near the radio room."

"And you didn't put up a holler about getting a lid!"

"You," lamented Mullen, "don't happen to be the red meat of two jumbo-size bookies and a Philadelphia lawyer, with the Maritime Credit Corporation licking up the scraps." Mullen rolled his eyes in anguish. "Besides which, I'm in hock to a loan shark. If I don't come through with a certain deal of five grand at the end of this next voyage, I'm to be measured for a pair of cement water skis for use on the East River."

"With all the guys you've bilked in your time cheering," I said.

Mullen groaned. "Bud, it ain't

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funny. Before we started out last voyage, a bookie said he wanted me to meet a friend who had a proposition to make. I arranged to meet the friend in a joint over on South Street. It turned out to be Gimpy Joe."

"Gimpy Joe! You can't mean that hoodlum waterfront loan shark?"

Mullen nodded dismally. "His proposition sounded okay, though—no smuggling or waterfront-racket stuff. He told me a cousin of his—another of the mob, I wouldn't mind betting—has a favorite nephew who's a ham operator with a new commercial license and figures he'd like to knock around the world for a while on a freighter. So if I'd ease him into a third's job for six months, I could pocket all the pay coming to him during that time."

Mullen shifted miserably in the chair. "Up to now, Grisby has always let me pick a new third whenever I wanted to. So I told Gimpy okay, but I needed the money right then. I said it'd only take me one voyage to get rid of the third I already had, and to have his cousin's nephew all ready to sign on when the ship got back. He put up the five grand on the strength of it."

"So that's why you put the skids under the last third!" I said. "Mullen," I went on, "you must have been plumb crazy to make that deal with Gimpy Joe. Why, only yesterday his name was in the newspapers in connection with a body found floating off Staten Island. They say no one ever runs out on Gimpy Joe and gets away with it. Suppose you get sick, or get slugged in a gin mill, and the man who takes your place here as chief bounces that nephew of Gimpy Joe's cousin?"

Mullen moaned. "Suppose you had my ex-June bride's lawyer who claims I welshed on a bet with him and means to get out a warrant for my arrest if I don't come up soon with a hunk of back alimony."

I didn't weep. I'd sailed with Mullen over a year, long enough to get thick-skinned about his financial woes. His mental output was a steady stream of schemes for raising money to pay off a bookie or some other creditor who was breathing down his neck. He got twenty-five dollars out of me the day I joined the ship by saying he'd just got a hot tip on a pony and would give it back to me when the ship paid off that same afternoon. It took six months to get that money back—at five dollars a time. I got along all right with Mullen but took good care not to get hooked into any of his schemes, like selling phony stock around the ship.

"You'll just have to put the skids under the female Marconi and then hope you don't catch the measles or

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meet up with some of the guys laying for you," I said.

Mullen rolled his big eyes again and moaned. "The skids are out. Grisby said I've got to carry this female for the full six months even if she's good, bad, or just a plain stinker as an operator. He warned me that if by any chance she wants to quit before the time's up, it'll be just too bad if she doesn't do it licking my hand. That goes for you too, Bud. So watch out how you handle this female. Lay off the wisecracks, or Grisby'll toss you out on your ear on West Street."

"Say, who is this prima donna anyway?"

"She's the daddy's darling of the senior vice-president, Henry Stultz. She looks like a corn-fed hippo. When I saw her in Grisby's office—honest, I looked around to see if the two-headed dwarf had tagged along. She's been fooling around with ham radio, and figures it would be romantic to roam the bounding seas aboard a tramp steamer. Her old man told Grisby to fix her up with a third's job when one became vacant, so she can get the six-months' endorsement on the commercial license she passed a few months ago. I'll bet he's wanting her out of his sight and hoping she meets up with her big romance, with no pity for the poor guy she nabs. When I started to squawk to Grisby about wishing a lid onto me, he said he was only the radio superintendent, of course, but if I'd like to take my squawk direct to the senior vice-president himself—you know how funny Grisby thinks he can be."

"You mean he expects us to nurse this female lid along for six months, no matter what she's like as an operator, just because of her old man?"

"Not expects—*demands*. He doesn't want any static feedback from darling Daddy. I said I'd treat her like a long-lost kid sister. I said I'd feed her the milk of human kindness to the last drop. I said I'd act like I wanted to be welcomed as a son-in-law."

The chair creaked to Mullen's shudder. "You've got to give me a hand to ditch her in one voyage, Bud. After I left Grisby's office I phoned Gimpy Joe at a number he'd given me. I told him about the female and her old man fouling up the deal. He got real mad. He said her old man was loaded with enough dough to be able to charter a ship of his own for six months for his boiler-sized daughter. I begged him for one more trip. He said okay, but if I didn't have the job or his five grand at the end of it—that's when he started talking about the cement skis."

"I should help you out after

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wanting to stick me with that nephew lid for six months!" I said. "Besides which, if you go skiing, maybe I'll be able to talk Grisby into making me chief here."

"Bud, the nephew's no lid. He's a crack amateur. All he needs is breaking in on commercial procedure. And, Bud, you wouldn't let me down just to get the chief's job over my dead body."

"Maybe after one trip with the girl, I'll feel like beating Gimpy Joe to the punch."

The female came aboard next morning, and the ship took a sudden list to starboard. She looked as if a gland had gone haywire somewhere. Put her at two-twenty avoirdupois; divide that by ten for her age, or thereabouts. Her hair was oil-black, split down the middle, and hung over her ears like bristles. Her horn-rimmed lenses were as thick as headlights. Her legs could have shored up a battleship, and her breastworks would have made a good bow fender for a tug. Her best feature was her skin, smooth and creamy-white except where daubed with rouge and lipstick, like frosting on a baked potato, but I suppose Nature nods now and then.

Her eyelids flapped like blinker-light shutters when she looked around the radio room and its three transmitters and receivers.

"How will I ever get to know how to operate all this wonderful equipment?" she squealed.

"Bit different from the old ham rig, eh?" said Mullen, with a laugh as false as a goose hunter's honk. "I'll soon put you in the way of running it. Bud here'll be glad to help you out any time."

She switched her headlights to me. "You must be Bud Reid," she squeaked. "Mr. Grisby spoke about you. I'm sure glad to know you."

She held out a limb. It was like shaking hands with the gooseneck connection to an oil-fuel line. "I'm glad to know you, too, Miss Stultz," I said, and tried to look it.

"Call me Lulu," she said. She sat down in the operating-desk swivel chair without demolishing it and blinked at the sending keys. "I'm so thrilled. I do hope I'll make out all right."

"You can always count on me, Lulu," said Mullen. "If I don't happen to be around, Bud'll be glad to put you straight."

"If I'm not already in a jacket," I said.

Mullen shot me a warning look, and then gave another laugh that rang like a turnstile slug. "Bud's something of a wit, Lulu. Don't mind what he says. You'll get used to him. Start relaxing now. We'll take good care of you."

"I know I'm just going to love

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being here with you both," squeaked Lulu.

It was my turn to look Mullen a warning not to go overboard with the milk of human kindness, but he poured it on as if he were the fount of it, on tap twenty-four hours a day, with me as a spare nozzle. Lulu lapped it up between squeals. After she'd gone, I mimicked her.

"I'm just going to love being here with you both."

"That's what I want her to say to her old man tonight, and to Grisby before we sail tomorrow." Mullen groaned. "But how'm I going to be able to tell Gimpy Joe she just loved to quit?"

Toward sailing time next day, I happened to go along to Mullen's cabin. A tough-looking character with his nose knocked out of kilter was just coming out. Mullen was staring wide-eyed at a couple of things the guy had just tossed onto the bunk.

"Who's your pal?" I asked. "Dracula's son?"

"One of Gimpy's runners. He brought me a bon-voyage remembrance from Gimpy."

Mullen was still staring at the two small objects on the bunk. I took a closer look at them. They were a pair of cuff links made in the form of skis.

We sailed on time for Havana. The *Quetzal* was one of two passenger ships left in the Bayano Line; the others had been sold to foreign companies as unprofitable, and the line was concentrating on its freighters. The sister ship of the *Quetzal* was the *Condor*, which was on the Kingston-Cristobal run. The *Quetzal* was on a fast schedule to Havana and back.

I've sailed with some awful lids in my time, but Lulu was the queen of them all. The errors she could make in receiving a ten-word radiogram would make it a cryptogram. She wasn't able to type messages direct onto message forms as they came over the air, and so had to use pencil and scratch paper and then type them out with one finger. Sometimes the radio room would look as though the wastepaper basket had exploded, with scraps strewn over the desk and floor and Lulu frantically trying to piece together a radiogram from a fistful. Her news bulletins might include such items as the Security Council voting a pay increase for Bronx firemen over the threatened veto of a Yemen delegate named Andrei Cadogan. As for operating receivers and transmitters, Lulu could blow fuses as fast as candles, and get on more wrong frequencies than Mullen on horses.

"Cement skis are beginning to look good," wailed Mullen, but in front of Lulu, he took it grinning

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like a skull. I've seen him look so mean at some kid third operator over a trifle as to make the kid's hair stand up, but from the smiles he wrapped around Lulu, you'd have thought he'd been weaned on a laughing hyena.

"You're doing pretty good, Lulu," he lilted to her, "and when another wise guy on a shore station wants to know which hoof you're sending with, you just ask him which hole in his head he's receiving through."

All the same, I've seen him come weaving from the radio room as if he'd been sideswiped by the jumbo cargo boom, frantically waving at me to go in and have a turn at straightening her out.

My watch, twelve-to-four, followed Lulu's eight-to-twelve, and the first thing I'd have to do on relieving her was to thump up the chair cushion. I'd no sooner have taken over the watch than I'd probably get a rush service message from Western Union demanding a check on the address of radiogram number so-and-so, because the recipient was frantically trying to convince his wife that the love-and-kisses message wasn't for him. Then the bridge might phone for another time tick, saying that if the one given by Lulu was correct, they might as well heave the chronometer overboard and start using an alarm clock. Or the captain, after reading Lulu's latest hydrographic warning, would perhaps phone from the chartroom that he'd be a red-whiskered walrus before he'd believe icebergs were menacing shipping in the Florida Straits.

After a few watches like that, I began to view the Brotherhood of Cloaked Assassins as humanitarians. "Lulu," I pleaded, "don't linger near the rails on these dark nights. I'm easily tempted."

But she only giggled and squealed, "Oh, Bud! What would your wife say?"

As we were approaching Havana, I said to Mullen, "By the time the voyage is over, I'll be begging Grisby to toss me out on both ears."

"Now that I've got her ready to lick my hand," said Mullen, "I've gotta figure out some way of getting the skids under her."

He looked at me gloomily, and I said, "You've only got a few more days left to keep from being fished out of the drink off Staten Island."

Mullen had already thought up a scheme with a part for me in it. He broached it when the three of us were sitting around in the radio room as the ship was tying up in Havana.

"I guess you'll feel like taking in some night life, Lulu," said Mullen.

From the way her eyes popped, you could tell she hadn't been

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swamped with offers from the Casanovas of the officers messroom. "I'd be scared to go alone," she squeaked.

"Scared of what?" I said, and Mullen looked black at me.

"Maybe you'd like to come with Bud and me," said Mullen, as though sounding out Elizabeth Taylor. I glared at him for including me, but he wasn't looking.

It was like tossing a chunk of meat to a seagull. Lulu gobbled it up on the wing. "What time shall I be ready?"

"Around ten o'clock, Lulu. In time for the first floor show at the Ice Pick."

"I hope it's not too risqué," Lulu giggled, quivering like a pneumatic riveter.

"Not risky enough," I said, and Mullen scowled my way again. I managed to hold my tongue till she'd gone, and then I opened up on Mullen.

"Bud," said Mullen, looking scandalized, "what do you think Grisby would say if her old man complained we'd left her aboard all on her lonesome in Havana?"

"He'd say we were sober for once."

"It'll only be to the first show at the Ice Pick, Bud. After that, you can go off by yourself if you want to. If it's the checks you're worrying about, I'll take care of 'em."

"I'll take my camera along for that," I said. "Okay, but not past the Ice Pick for me." I was willing to go that far in keeping Mullen off the cement skis.

We set out just before ten o'clock. Lulu was got up all in yellow, like a Halloween pumpkin, and looking as if she had daubed her cheeks and lips with the bosun's red-lead brush. I'm not sure Mullen wasn't talking double when he drooled, "Lulu, you look swell." Swollen was the word.

Lulu giggled at me. "Doesn't he like to kid?"

"He never spoke truer words," I said.

"I'd be puffed up with vanity if I took any notice of you two flatterers."

I could have got in a beautiful one there if Mullen hadn't caught my eye.

At the dock gates, the guards stared at Lulu. I thought they were going to turn her back as a danger to pedestrians having to step off the sidewalk to let her pass. Mullen had sent word out to Tony earlier, and he was waiting with his cab. Tony hopped out and opened the door. You could tell by his face that he figured Lulu must be a distiller's daughter to have Mullen and me as escorts.

"Lulu," said Mullen, "I want you to meet Tony, the only taxi driver

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in Havana who goes around corners on one wheel instead of two. Tony, meet Lulu, our new third operator."

Tony was so astonished that he lapsed into Spanish. *"Tercero telegrafista!"* he exclaimed. Recovering, he snatched off his peak cap and bowed with a beaming smile. "Ees ver' big pleasure meet you, Mees Lulu." As she and Mullen climbed into the cab, Tony whispered to me, "'E say Lulu, no?"

"That's right," I said. "Take us to the Ice Pick."

With Mullen and Lulu already settled in the rear, Tony glanced at his tires with misgivings, but the Ice Pick was only a few blocks from the waterfront, and we reached it without a blowout. Mullen stopped as if to pay Tony, saying to me, "You take Lulu inside while I check with Tony on the horses for tomorrow's races."

There were no races scheduled for the next day, but I had a notion that Mullen might give me more than a black look for pointing that out. I clamped onto Lulu's left fluke and steered her into the Ice Pick. There weren't many people at the tables yet, only a few tourists, by the looks of their peeling skins. Most of our passengers had gone on the conducted tours to the jai-alai games and the casinos for the early part of the evening. The few patrons were probably stopovers from some other ship, or else had come in by plane. They stared at Lulu as if they thought she'd been towed in on a barge.

I chose a table that gave us a naked-eye view for the floor show. The hostesses remained seated when they saw I'd brought my own female fixings in bulk. I waited until Mullen came in from his huddle with Tony before ordering.

"What would you like, Lulu?"

She giggled. "I stick to Scotch till I start to feel tight. Then I go on gin and tonic."

Mullen and I swapped looks. Lulu sounded as if her baby food had been spiked with absinthe. While we were waiting for the drinks, the band started up with a waltz. Mullen got up.

"Bud, give Lulu a turn round the dance floor while I go over and say hello to Pancho."

He was on his way before I could tell him I wasn't a piano mover. I was half expecting Lulu to say she could no more dance than do backflips, but she rose like a balloon, and when the other patrons saw me get up to follow, they sat tight to watch. If you've ever tried putting your arm round a gasometer, you'll know what it was like.

I glanced over at Mullen now and then. He was standing in the office doorway, talking to Pancho.

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Mullen used to get tips from Pancho on the horses out at Orienta Park, not always sizzling ones, and Pancho placed bets for him on races run after we'd sailed. Mullen reciprocated by boosting the Ice Pick to the cruise passengers. From the way the pair of them kept looking our way, I could tell that Lulu was the filly whose form was the topic of the moment. Finally, Mullen started back toward our table, and I saw Pancho pick up the phone.

The place was sticky hot despite the air-conditioning, and Lulu was beginning to steam like a workhorse. I led her back to Mullen. While she was toweling her face with a yellow handkerchief the size of a corn plaster, Pancho left his office and came over to our table. Mullen pulled out another chair.

Before sitting down, Pancho smiled and bowed at Lulu like a TV star to his sponsor's wife. Pancho was as slim as a bullfighter and handsome enough to keep the women in the place after their husbands had started getting sentimental with the hostesses.

"Lulu," said Mullen, "this is Pan-

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cho. He manages this place. One swell *hombre.*"

"Eet ees ver' lofly delight to make your acquaintance, Mees Lulu," Pancho said.

Right away I knew there was something cooking, because Pancho could speak English with scarcely any accent. Lulu was so open-mouthed from his gushy manner that the handkerchief almost vanished in the intake.

"Watch out for Pancho," said Mullen, winking at Lulu. "Pancho's got no time for skinny babes. He likes 'em on the plump side, and when he comes across one that doesn't look like half a wishbone—but say, Pancho, did your wife ever find out about that stewardess you went crazy over?"

Pancho sighed. "She find out. So I no breeng my stewardess here any more times. My wife—she come een now and then and look around." Pancho turned to Lulu. "My wife," he said mournfully, "ees what you call jealous spitcat."

"Well," giggled Lulu, "if you're two-timing her—"

"Ees not two-time when you feel beeg loff for one beeg beautiful girl doll like you," protested Pancho. "Ees eet my faul' my wife ees skinny and look like half weesh-bone, as my frien' Meester Moolen say?"

The flattery made Lulu's face look like the whole red-lead pot.

Pancho leaned toward her and gushed, "You haff beautiful skeen, Mees Lulu."

Lulu gave a pleased squeal and said brightly, "I'll bet you say that to all your customers."

"Every woman," said Pancho, "she haff something better than other woman. Weeth my stewardess, eet ees her eyes. They are like beeg stars. Weeth you, Mees Lulu, eet ees the skeen."

Pancho's wife, Marta, wasn't anything like half a wishbone. Marta was a hostess at the Ice Pick before Pancho married her, and she had a figure that would make Venus look like a rolled-up tarpaulin. She was a good sport.

"Let's have another drink before you start skinning Lulu," I said.

We sat for a while, with Pancho handling Lulu as though he were trying to line her up for his follies' chorus. I tried to figure the pitch, and wondered what was delaying the start of the floor show. Mullen didn't offer to take Lulu out on the dance floor, and I sure didn't. All of a sudden, Mullen, who had picked a chair facing the entrance, said, "Excuse me," and got up, giving me the high sign to follow. Dumb-like, I got up and trailed behind him to the men's room. It had a glass window in the door, and Mullen stood behind it, looking back at the ta-

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bles surrounding the dance floor.

"Marta just came in," he said.

"So?" I said.

"Take a look."

I looked past Mullen's shoulder and saw Marta heading straight for the table where Pancho was leaning toward Lulu as if to get a closer view of her pelt. Marta was fumbling with her handbag. Pancho jumped up, intercepted her halfway to the table and grabbed her.

"Come on," said Mullen.

He shoved open the door and we headed for our table. Mullen swept up Lulu's handbag from the table. Lulu was gaping goggle-eyed at Pancho struggling with Marta, who was screeching at Lulu in Spanish.

"Quick, Lulu!" said Mullen. "We'll get you out the back way."

Lulu was a willing fugitive. While the rest of the patrons looked happy at having dropped into the Ice Pick that evening, Mullen maneuvered her toward the door beside the bar, through a storeroom, and down a passageway into the side street. A taxi was parked outside. From the way Mullen yelped, you'd have thought it a miraculous coincidence.

"It's Tony! What a break! Hop in, Lulu, quick, before Marta comes tearing around from the front."

Lulu hopped in like a scared baby elephant. I was last in again, and Tony was off before I could get my leg in and slam the door. There was a screech from behind that sounded like Marta.

"Whew!" said Mullen. "That's what I call a photo finish. Head straight for the ship, Tony. What lousy luck, Marta happening to show up when Bud and me had just left the table! She took you to be the stewardess, Lulu, seeing you alone at a table with Pancho. That's what she was raving about in Spanish."

"Why didn't Pancho put her straight?" wailed Lulu.

"He was doing his best. But you can't talk to the dames down here when they're all whooped up like that. They stab first and get the score afterward."

"Stab!" squealed Lulu.

"Sure. Pancho's wife's been carrying a stiletto in her handbag ever since she found out about the fat stewardess."

"Why doesn't she stab him instead?"

"What—knock off her meal ticket! You've gotta hand it to these dames, Lulu. They go after the cheese, not the rats."

Lulu was quiet for a while. I could see we weren't headed direct to the ship. I awaited further developments before I'd hop out of the cab.

After a minute or so, Lulu said, "Do we have to go right back to the

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ship? Couldn't we go to some other place?"

"That's just what Marta might figure," said Mullen, sounding horrified. "She'll make a quick round of them, looking for us. You'll be a lot safer on board. We wouldn't want anything to happen to you, Lulu. Would we, Bud?"

I kept to the literal truth, with no hint of what I'd like to see happen to both Mullen and Lulu: "I wouldn't want to go anywhere else with Lulu tonight."

Tony seemed to have stopped worrying about his tires, for he was covering all side streets. I suppose Mullen felt that even Lulu might soon notice that we were making minute progress toward the ship.

"Hey, Tony," he yelled, "I said the ship."

"Oh, 'scuse," said Tony. "I t'ink you mean Sheep Bar."

I didn't know of any Ship Bar, but then that was another disadvantage of not having been consulted on tomorrow's racing form.

We turned down a long side street leading to the waterfront. As we neared the dock gates, Mullen yelled, "Stop, Tony! That looks like Marta waiting on the corner. She beat us to it, figuring we might go right back to the ship."

I could see a female standing in the fringe of light cast by the dock-gate lights, but to identify her at that distance, you needed to have said hello to Pancho in his office a short while ago.

"She wouldn't have got here ahead of us if you hadn't gone rambling off to the Ship Bar, Tony," complained Mullen.

"Ver' sorry," said Tony.

"I know what it is!" said Mullen, the all-knowing. "She figured you're a stewardess on our ship, Lulu. Then she figured we'd take you right back to the ship. So she took a cab, hoping to get here ahead of us. That's the tamales down here, Lulu. Jealousy makes 'em as smart as a bill collector at figuring your next move. We'll have to hold off till she's gone."

"Couldn't you get out and tell her who I am?" Lulu said miserably.

"Who, me? Not after snatching you from right under her stiletto! She'll have it in for me now, and Bud, too. We've queered ourselves with Marta. Maybe Tony could manage it."

Tony let out a scared yelp. "Marta—she stab taxi driver because someone say he take Pancho and other *senorita* for ride."

"Aren't there any police here?" wailed Lulu. "A woman like that should be locked up."

"The police keep clear of love triangles down here, Lulu. Too risky with babes like Marta loose.

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hey just cart off the corpses—Look
ıt, Tony! She's coming for us."

The female had shot from the
inge of light and was loping
›ward the cab, fumbling with her
andbag.

"She's getting out her stiletto,"
asped Mullen.

I nearly said that what she
eeded was a harpoon. Tony got
ıe cab under way with a jerk like a
atapult. He sheered by Marta
lose enough to have skinned her
ose. She screeched at us in Spanish
s we shot by.

"What did she say?" moaned
ulu.

"She said she'll cut out your
eart even if she has to wait ten
ears watching for you every time
ıe ship comes back," said Mullen
olefully.

"Oh, dear. How'm I going to get
ack aboard?" wailed Lulu.

"Relax, Lulu," said Mullen.
We'll hire a boat."

Tony, the consultant on tomor-
ow's races, seemed able to antici-
ate Mullen, for he had pulled up
breast a boat landing. After we'd
ot out of the cab, Mullen said, "I
uess we spoiled business for you
onight, Tony."

"Spoil *mucho*," moaned Tony.
Marta see my face. I no go near
ce Peek for long-time. Maybe then
Marta cool off and no put hole in
ne."

"It's all my fault, Tony," said
Mullen mournfully. "Here's a
twenty-dollar bill to kinda make up
for things."

I was willing to bet the only
twenty on that bill was in the serial
number. We walked onto the land-
ing, where a couple of launches
were tied up. Mullen went up to a
fat man and seemed to be bargain-
ing with him. The man looked at
Lulu, and I figured he was estimat-
ing possible overload. In about five
minutes he had us alongside our
pier.

As we were walking toward the
gangway, Mullen said, "Lulu, we
won't say anything on board about
Pancho's wife. Those guys would
only kid you about it. You wouldn't
like that."

"I wouldn't like it one bit,"
moaned Lulu.

A few hands, including the offi-
cer of the watch, were standing
around the gangway, and you could
tell by their smiles that they didn't
need being told that we hadn't
wanted to linger under the palms
with Lulu. Lulu hurried off to her
cabin, and I have a notion she
promptly locked the door.

Mullen and I went up to the ra-
dio. I was now able to let fly at
Mullen. "So I could go off by my-
self after the first show!" I hooted.
"You wanted me for a stooge in
that crazy setup."

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"Relax, Bud. You just helped out in setting the skids under Lulu. You can't kick about that. If I'd told you ahead of time, you'd have said it wouldn't work. It worked."

"What worked? All I see is you got Lulu to thinking she's a slap-bang home buster."

"And scared out of her panties. I'm going to work on her for the rest of the trip. By the time we dock, she'll be ready to jump off the crosstrees rather than go back to Havana. She'll tell Grisby she wants off, and she'll do it while licking my hand."

"Grisby," I said scornfully; "isn't going to fall for that Ice Pick scenario, you big nut! Nor will her old man. Or if he does, he'll cable the Havana office to arrange a love clinch between Lulu and Marta."

Mullen grinned. "Lulu isn't going to tell Grisby or her old man about the Ice Pick, because I'm going to lead her to think the place is a whole lot more than just risqué, and so her old man would be sore at the two of us for taking her there, and would tell Grisby to fire the pair of us."

"You leave me out of it, Mullen," I howled. "I don't want to get foul of Grisby or her old man."

"Relax, Bud. That's only for propaganda purposes with Lulu. She'll think twice about getting *two* guys in dutch."

"And what reason," I jeere "will she give for wanting to quit?"

"She doesn't like the ship, th run—nothing. I'll tell her to get he old man to have Grisby fix her u with the third's job on the *Condo* next time it's vacant."

"Mullen," I said, "Grisby isn't go ing to be fooled. He's going to sme something, even if he can't prove i Remember how funny that gu thinks he can be. This thing's goin to back up on you. It's not going t be skids for Lulu, but cement ski for you."

We sailed next day. Northbound the only improvement Lulu showe was to type with two fingers instea of one. Mullen continued to tak the punishment with a smile eve when Lulu wasn't around. Lul didn't mention Marta much to me and when she did, all I'd say wa something like, "It was too bad i had to happen, Lulu."

But Mullen was saying plenty The night before we were due i New York, Lulu said to me, "Mr Mullen thinks it would be a lot safe for me to stay ashore for a while and he'll try to straighten out things with Mrs. Pancho. Then I coul come back here. He says I could as Mr. Grisby to put me on the *Condo* when there's an opening, but h hopes I'll wait till he puts Mrs. Pan cho right and then come back an sail with him again."

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"You can't go wrong by listening to him," I lied.

"He's all upset, blaming himself and saying it wouldn't have happened if he hadn't taken me to the Ice Pick. He says Mr. Grisby will fire him for taking me to a place like that. And maybe you, too. I promised him I wouldn't say a word about it to anyone."

"That's pretty nice of you, Lulu," I said, inwardly raging at Mullen for getting me mixed up in all this double-talk.

"He's sure a grand guy," Lulu gushed. "He says I'm doing pretty good for a first-tripper, and after another voyage or two, I'll be a crackerjack." Lulu let out a sigh like a deflating tire. "I'm sure going to miss him. It's been swell sailing with him. And you, too, Bud," she added, as if remembering I was the spare nozzle. "Mr. Mullen says you'll help to clear me with Mrs. Pancho."

"You can count on me, Lulu," I lied again.

Soon after we docked on the following morning, Mullen and Lulu went straight over to Grisby's office. Mullen was full of confidence. "It's in the works," he crowed to me.

I had my doubts, and while I was waiting in the radio room for Mullen to return aboard, the tough-looking character with the nose out of kilter stuck his head in the doorway.

"Where's Mullen?" he growled.

"Gone over to the office," I said.

The guy grunted and went away. I went out on deck and saw him going down the gangway.

By lunch time, there was no sign of Mullen or Lulu. Lulu might have stayed ashore for lunch with her old man, but Mullen would have come back aboard. It could only mean that Mullen's scheme had flopped, and Crooked Nose had taken him to see Gimpy Joe. If he didn't show up for ship's payoff at three o'clock and the purser wanted to know where he'd got to, I'd tell him to try dragging the East River.

By two-thirty, I was thinking of phoning Grisby to see if he had anything on the whereabouts of Mullen. Suddenly Mullen came into the radio room, looking as if he'd just been dragged away from a wailing wall. He all but collapsed into the swivel chair and groaned.

"So Grisby caught on!" I jibed.

"It was Lulu's old man. He fouled up the works. After Lulu left Grisby's office to go up to her old man's private office on the fourth floor, I went to work on Grisby about the guy I'd got in mind before Lulu got into the act. I told Grisby he was still around, and so there'd be no need to go to the trouble of rustling up another third.

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"Then," said Mullen woefully, "just when I'd got things pretty well squared away with Grisby, his phone rang. It was Lulu's old man. He told Grisby what a swell guy I was, and couldn't Grisby arrange something for Lulu and me aboard the *Condor*. I don't know if Grisby was still suspicious, even though he'd seen Lulu almost holding hands with me across his desk, or if he wanted to put himself in good with her old man, but he sure fixed up something quick. The *Condor's* in dry dock for annual inspection, so Grisby's transferring her chief and third here, and shifting me and Lulu to the *Condor*."

"Didn't I remind you how funny Grisby thinks he can be?" I said. "When are you going water-skiing?"

"Gimpy's runner was laying for me outside the office building. When I started talking, he told me to tell it to Gimpy, and took me over to the joint on South Street. Gimpy was in the back room with a couple of goons. I told him about Lulu's old man tossing a monkey wrench into the works. I said I'd got Lulu eating out of my hand, and if he'd give me time, I'd get her to put the bite on her old man for the five grand. He said nix to that."

"I've got to hand it to you, Mullen, trying to con a shark like Gimpy a second time."

"Then he said okay," groaned Mullen. "He said he'd call it a loan at top interest rates and with wedding bells for collateral."

"Wedding bells?"

"He said they'd make it a whole lot easier for putting the touch on Lulu's old man. It was Gimpy who did the conning—his way."

I wasn't sure I was getting it right. "You mean to say you're going to marry Lulu?"

Mullen rolled his big eyes unhappily. "What else, with two goons and a launch waiting at the slip outside, all set for a quick run up the East River? Gimpy handed me the phone and told me to call Lulu. By now she's telling Daddy her wonderful news."

I was completely knocked over for the moment. "Well," I said, "one thing about it, you won't need skis."

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If one would hark to Aesop: Better beans and bacon in peace than cakes and ale in fear.

by FRED S. TOBEY

WHEN COLDREN KASCH was nine, he asked his grandfather why he had chosen the junk business as a career. The grandfather, who took children's questions seriously, replied that although it was not the most exciting way to make money, he found it reliable. "There are

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plenty of ways to get rich in a hurry," he said, "but they tend to be risky."

Old Mr. Kasch, who in his youth had been a penniless immigrant, left a modest fortune to his son when he died. The son, Coldren's father, set out to multiply it in the stock market, but unhappily the market did not cooperate, and in the course of a few months most of the inheritance had slipped down the drain.

Coldren was told that he must leave college and go to work.

Going to work proved to be more easily said than done. Plants in and around Los Angeles were laying off people that season, not hiring them. After many rejections, Coldren thought of his grandfather's words and came to a decision: He would go into the old-clothes business.

His forebear had started as a simple ragpicker, but Coldren, the college dropout, was more sophisticated about it—even to the extent of a bit of leavening humor. On the used panel truck that he bought with borrowed money he had the name "Kasch" painted in bold capitals, and underneath, in script, "For Your Clothes". In this vehicle he toured Los Angeles, and he picked up some bargains. When he had enough merchandise, he rented a small store in the city and offered the goods for sale. The words, "Kasch—For Your Clothes" went on the storefront, too, and in due course the phrase came to be something of a byword. Coldren ventured to sew a label into some of the better garments. "Kasch", the label said. "Clothes with a History". There were movie stars in Los Angeles, weren't there? Who was to say the garments had not been theirs?

At the end of five years Coldren was doing quite well, but he had not become rich.

One day the colorful little truck (now a new one), with "Kasch For Your Clothes" on its side, was halted in midtraffic, a couple of blocks off Sunset Boulevard, by a city vehicle repairing a damaged light pole. As Coldren, who was at the wheel, waited in bored resignation, he heard someone calling. Turning his head, he saw a pretty girl leaning out the window of a ground-floor apartment, swinging a man's jacket in her hand.

"You want this, Kasch?" she called.

Coldren shut off the engine and walked over. The jacket, he now saw, was shoddy though not very old, and he observed that at close range the same might be said of the pretty girl. The neighborhood was familiar to him, and Coldren correctly judged her to be a practitioner of the oldest profession.

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"What'll you give me for this?" she asked.

Coldren took the jacket from her hand. He pursed his lips. "I couldn't give much. Three dollars."

"Three dollars! Come on, this is all the so-and-so left me when he split last night. I'd like to get my fingernails into him."

"Four," said Coldren. "It's a cheap garment, that's more than I should give."

"Well, I suppose four bucks is better than nothing. You want to come in and talk about it?"

The city vehicle had moved, and cars behind Coldren's truck were honking.

"Sorry, I've got to run," he said. He quickly handed the girl four one-dollar bills, and hurried off with the jacket.

Now, Coldren never sent a newly-acquired garment out for cleaning without first examining it to see if something might be concealed in the lining. In five years he had not salvaged very much, but he found the discoveries exciting, such as they were. Twice there had been good-luck pieces of no cash value, once a gold coin. Most commonly, when he found anything, it would be a five or a ten-dollar bill, which he assumed had been sewn into the lining by a fond wife or mother, against the danger of robbery or personal indiscretion.

In the jacket just purchased he found something quite different—a key, of a most interesting sort, and in an odd place.

The key had been pushed into the padding of the shoulder from the inside, through a slit that seemed to have been made for the purpose. Coldren almost missed it, because he did not generally examine the shoulders, but this key was a rather bulky one, and his fingers, wandering over the garment, sensed something not quite normal.

Coldren had had a key like this in his possession not long before, when he had checked some parcels for an hour or so at Los Angeles International Airport. It had a round stem, and a number was stamped on it in large figures. Certainly a locker key, he decided, but from the airport or from somewhere else? No doubt bus stations had similar lockers.

But why go to such pains to conceal it? People didn't generally leave things in public lockers very long, because someone comes and empties them when the time expires. Coldren seemed to remember that a single coin was good for only twenty-four hours.

Someone must have wanted that key out of the way in case he were searched, reflected Coldren, and if that were so, it must represent something quite valuable.

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Standing alone in the back room of his store, the locker key in one hand and the jacket dangling from the other, the used-clothing merchant let his imagination roam. He had read of a jewel theft in the city the day before; didn't thieves sometimes use parcel lockers as temporary hiding places for their loot? Yes, he had seen that on television. There had been a bank robbery, too, in the last day or so, he recalled. Could the key in his hand be the open sesame to a fortune in bank notes?

Ah, but if this were the key to such valuables, mused he, would the owner of the jacket willingly have left it at the girl's apartment? Hardly. Suppose, then, the girl was lying. Had her visitor been a victim of violence, and was she trying to get rid of all the evidences of his visit?

Coldren's imagination was now in full gallop. He saw a weighted body being dumped off a bridge into the water, heard the girl, returning to her apartment, exclaim in annoyance at the sight of the overlooked jacket. How to get rid of it? Certainly not in the rubbish, where it might be discovered. What better way than to sell it to Kasch, whose truck chanced to have stopped outside the window at the very moment?

Now, if there had been violence, didn't that make it even more likely that whatever was in the locker was worth a great deal? How much time was there? Coldren put the key into his pocket, told his assistant he would be gone for an hour or so, and hurried out to his panel truck.

When he returned to his store he found his assistant awaiting him anxiously. A girl had called in his absence, looking for a jacket she said she had sold to the driver of the Kasch truck only that morning. It was most important, she said, that she get the jacket back, and as soon as possible. The assistant had lied to her, saying that Mr. Kasch was out with the truck, and that nothing had yet been removed from it that day. After all, what did he know of Mr. Kasch's intentions regarding the jacket? He had preferred not to take the responsibility of letting the girl rummage through the back room to find it. In an hour or so, he had told her, Mr. Kasch would be back with the truck. Could she return then?

The girl said she would come back. She had appeared quite agitated, and when the assistant looked out the window after her, he saw her get into a car containing two men. Some sort of altercation ensued, and presently one of the men got out of the car and started toward the store. The second man

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jumped out and seized him by the arm. A brief argument followed, then the two men rejoined the girl in the car and drove away.

The assistant had not liked the looks of the two men, not a bit. "If they're still with that girl when she comes back," he said, "I think you ought to watch your step."

Coldren said he thought so, too. He went into his office, closed the door and picked up the telephone, glancing at his wall clock as he did so. It was just three o'clock.

At four the girl returned, and her two companions were still in attendance. One of them came into the store with her; the other stayed at the wheel of the car. Coldren had to agree with his assistant that the girl's escort had the appearance of someone you would not care to meet in a dark alley.

Did Mr. Kasch have the jacket she had sold him that morning, the girl asked? Coldren said he did indeed. He opened a closet, took the garment from a hook and laid it on the counter in front of her. The girl looked relieved.

"Yes, yes, that's it!" she said. "I'll buy it back from you." She took a purse from her handbag, extracted four dollars, and offered it to Coldren.

"It will be ten dollars," said Coldren.

"Ten! But you only paid me—"

Her companion spoke up, and his voice was like gravel rolling off a dump truck. "Pay him!" he said.

Without another word, she handed Coldren a ten-dollar bill. Her companion picked up the jacket, fingered it briefly and seemed satisfied. The pair turned and hurried out of the store.

"I feel quite sure they will not be back," said Coldren to his assistant, turning down the wall thermostat and turning off lights, "but just the same I think you and I had better close up shop and take the rest of the day off."

At police headquarters the next day, Coldren sat talking with Detective Lieutenant Carlson.

"I'm sorry I couldn't say much last night when you phoned," said the lieutenant. "We had some angles to check out first. I did tell you we followed the men and the girl to the locker, from your place."

"Yes—it was a smart idea of yours, rushing the key back to me and having me put it back in the jacket."

"Well, as things turned out it made some arrests possible, and it saved time. There are a lot of places in the city where a key like that could fit a locker. When you phoned us that the people were trying to get the jacket back, we figured the quickest thing would be just to follow them."

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"Don't keep me in suspense, Lieutenant. Where did you follow them to?"

"L.A. International Airport."

Coldren groaned. "The very place I would have gone if I had not decided to take the key to the police instead. So what was in the locker?"

"An attaché case. When they got back to the car with it from the lockers, we approached them and they tried to run. That gave us the excuse we needed to pick them up. There was a fortune in that attaché case, all right, Mr. Kasch, but it wasn't money or jewels, as you imagined. We found more than half a million dollars' worth of heroin."

"Heroin?" Coldren turned the implications over in his mind. "Then why was that guy crazy enough to leave his jacket at the girl's place with the locker key hidden in it?"

The lieutenant chuckled. "He didn't have any choice, Mr. Kasch. He's a small-time dealer known as Smokey Sam, and he'd hijacked the shipment and hidden it in the locker. He was waiting in the airport parking lot when the messenger, who had flown out in the morning to get the stuff, got back to his car about dusk. Smokey had pulled a very old trick, but it worked—he had let the air out of a front tire. While the messenger was changing the wheel, he knocked him out and grabbed the case. He thought he was smart to duck back into the airport building and put it in a locker, so he could show up right away in his usual spots and seem perfectly clean.

"The messenger must have caught a glimpse of him, though, because they went through Smokey's apartment like a wrecking crew. When they didn't find anything they put a tail on him, hoping he'd lead them to the place where he'd hidden the case.

"Smokey didn't know they'd pulled his apartment to pieces, and he felt like celebrating. He let the girl pick him up and take him to her place."

"The girl I bought the jacket from?"

"That's the girl. After they'd been there a while she talked him into an all-night stand, and he went out to get a bottle. She was sure he'd come back, because he left his jacket."

"So what happened to him?"

"The boss was tired of waiting, and the two goons who were tailing Smokey grabbed him when he came out. If they remembered that he'd had a jacket, they didn't think it was important. They worked him over the rest of the night, and sometime in the morning he broke down and told them about the key hidden

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in the shoulder padding. They got hold of the girl, but by then the jacket was gone and they had to take her to your place to get it back."

"Everybody is safely in jail, I hope?"

"Well, the pair we nabbed at the airport are, and we may get more. Smokey Sam is in the hospital. If he lives, he won't be doing any pushing for a while. The girl is in the clear—she had nothing to do with the junk."

"Junk!" Coldren exclaimed. "Ah, of course, there is junk and there is 'junk', isn't there? In my business, a fortune in junk does not fit into a briefcase. But at least I made a good profit on the jacket—one hundred and fifty per cent on my investment, and a quick turnover. Who knows what that other 'junk' would have got me?" he queried.

"You can be pretty sure it would have got you some extra holes in your head," said Lieutenant Carlson. "If you want to feel glad you brought us that key, visit the hospital and take a look at what's left of Smokey Sam. One thing puzzles me, though, Mr. Kasch. How come you *were* smart enough not to go hunting for that locker yourself? You guessed right that it was at the airport, and you were pretty sure there was something valuable involved."

Coldren thought a moment.

"I guess my late grandfather should get the credit," he said.

"How is that?"

"When I was a small boy," said Coldren, "he told me, 'There are plenty of ways to get rich in a hurry, but they tend to be risky.' "

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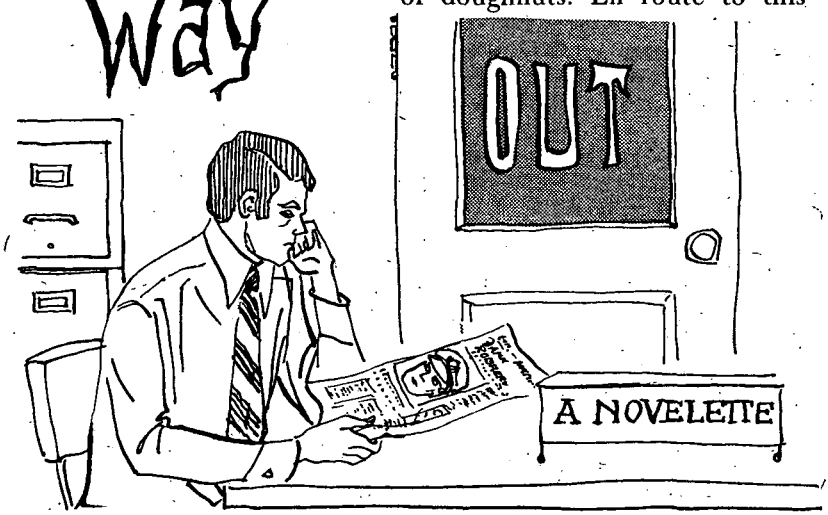
To the victor belong the spoils—and to his followers as well.

Another Way



ALLEN CUTLER had returned so unobtrusively from his annual two-week vacation that I was unaware of his presence until the midmorning coffee break. We were cohorts at Whatley Associates, a large commercial employment agency, Allen handling the placement of technical or professional people, while I found jobs for general office personnel.

There was a lounge at the back of the employment mill, furnished with a coffee urn and a daily supply of doughnuts. En route to this lounge I saw Cutler in his office and paused at the entrance. He was studying cards in his job file and talking on the phone. A tall, spare man nearing forty, he had an abundant crop of pure white hair which was set off strikingly by a deep tan acquired during his vacation.

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Allen put down the phone and glanced up. He flashed a quick smile at me, removed thick-lensed glasses, pinched his prominent nose. At that instant some insidious aspect of his appearance stirred an unpleasant memory. It was a puzzling reaction, completely unfounded. Allen was a likable guy with whom I had always been friendly, if not close. Possibly, without the black, heavily framed glasses which he seldom removed, he reminded me of some forgotten enemy in the distant past.

"Don't just stand there, Don," he said. "Applaud, do a little dance. Cutler has returned, bringing order to chaos, hope to despair."

We shook hands across the desk, he restored the glasses and gone was my vague impression that he recalled a sinister character from another time and context.

"Welcome back to unemployment," I said. "See you're flaunting a tan. Acapulco, I suppose. Or the Riviera?"

He snorted his contempt. "Nope, I rented a room right here at the beach and saved a bundle. What's the difference? You go to Acapulco, the Riviera, what do you find? Sand. Water. Sun. Girls in bikinis."

"So? Is that bad?" I asked him.

"That's good," he answered with a grin. "But the sun at the Riviera is the same one we got here. And anywhere you go, sand is sand, water is water."

"You forgot the girls in their bikinis," I told him.

"Wanna bet!" He chuckled. "It's you married slaves who forgot the girls in their bikinis long ago. Not me, buddy, not me."

Allen was a bachelor, embittered, it was rumored, by a disastrous marriage which had ended when his wife divorced him, grabbing the lion's share of his savings and property. He rarely spoke of his personal life, and his private existence outside the office was something of a mystery.

"Time for coffee-and," I announced. "You coming?"

"I got two customers writing applications," he replied. "Be a sport, will ya? Bring me a dark coffee, light on the sugar. Okay?"

The rest of the day was a hectic scramble. The outsized Sunday ads had stacked job-hungry clients wall-to-wall in the reception room, while the phone rang incessantly. The oddity of Allen Cutler hovered at the edge of my mind but didn't take hold until near dusk when I sat

by Robert Colby

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with a highball in the silence of my own livingroom. Beverly, my wife, was an R.N. She was on the night trick and, having left me a little note, had departed for the hospital before my arrival.

I might have dismissed that sudden, startling image of Allen Cutler as merely an absurd distortion of reality, somewhat like an old friend seen abruptly in the crazy-mirror of an amusement park, but my concentrated probing produced a conviction that Allen resembled some fugitive character in the news who had stuck in the back of my mind quite recently, during his absence.

I found the answer at last in a page of a newspaper ten days old. I had saved the page because a face illustrating a story seemed dimly familiar. I hadn't given it much more than a passing thought since the face was connected to a crime, but it did occur to me that perhaps the man had come to my desk in search of a job, so I had torn out the page and kept it.

Now I sat with it under a strong light and examined the face with a mental overlay of Cutler, sans eyeglasses, for the wanted criminal did not wear glasses. Further, his hair was invisible under a yachting cap.

It was not a photo but a composite drawing—and that was the real problem of identity. There are isolated examples of composites which so closely resemble a hunted criminal that it is a small miracle of collaboration between artist and witness. But usually a composite is not much more than a loose sketch of facial characteristics, the general aspects of facial structure and expression.

I understood these things. I had once earned almost enough bread to exist painting portraits, doing charcoal sketches and caricatures. I knew that if you erased the eyeglasses worn habitually and of necessity by Allen Cutler, and covered his white hair with a visored cap, the newspaper composite was a pretty fair, if mechanical, likeness. I could see it now, I could see it absolutely, though I was quite certain that the untrained eye, even of a friend, would not be able to match Cutler to the sketch.

Of course, it might have been a purely accidental similarity, for there was no reason to suspect that the other side of Allen's coin was a secret life of crime. So again I read the newspaper report, searching line-by-line for a clue.

Two gunmen behind .45 automatics had held up the Merchants Security Bank minutes after an armored truck had delivered close to ninety thousand in currency. They had worn yachting caps, and ornamental scarves about their necks. The scarves had been pulled up

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over their faces at the moment of entry, and only their eyes were revealed.

All might have gone well for the bandits, but a customer outside of the bank had approached the main door. Catching the picture at a glance, he had waved down a patrol car which had just then rounded the corner.

One gunman was killed in an exchange of shots as he left the bank. The other had taken a hostage, Miss Lynn Radford, a teller, and had escaped with the loot by a side door. The robber hustled her to a car in the next block and sped off.

As Lynn Radford explained it after she was released unharmed, her captor could not ride through the streets with a scarf over his face, so he had yanked it off. Thus she got a look at him, though mostly he kept his head turned away from her, and the cap covered his hair. Miss Radford wrote down the tag number of the car, a beige Ford sedan, but as it turned out, the license plates had been stolen.

There was a rather fascinating sidelight to the case. The slain robber, Harley Beaumont, 38, was a computer programmer in the data processing section of Merchants Security. Recently divorced, he had not the least criminal record.

Cutler appeared to be a bird of the same feather, and that was a piece of the puzzle. Also, as described by Miss Radford, the robber was tall and slim and in his late thirties, as was Cutler. She thought he had pale blue eyes and so did Cutler, as I remembered, though his eyes were somewhat obscured by his strong lenses. He couldn't function without glasses, but he could have worn contacts during the robbery.

Finally, the robbery had taken place on the third day of his vacation. Harley Beaumont had also been on vacation.

It was exciting to speculate upon all these possibilities, but my elation soon died and was replaced by an insinuating depression. What if Cutler really *was* the stickup man in the composite? If I could prove it, did I have the heart to turn him in?

With a sense of relief I decided that it was so far only a kind of game I was playing. I could take one more step before I was committed.

Next morning, determined to keep the secret even from Bev, who anyway was fast asleep when I left for the grind, I phoned Miss Lynn Radford at Merchants Security. After introducing myself with the information that I worked for Blaine Whatley Associates, I told her I had reason to believe that an acquaintance of mine might be the surviving

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partner in the bank robbery, the man who made her his hostage and escaped with some ninety thousand dollars.

It took a bit of doing, but I persuaded her to meet me at a restaurant where my "suspect" habitually had lunch so that she could take a look at him. I made the stipulation that since it was an extremely delicate matter to accuse a man who might be considered a friend of sorts, I did not want her to go out on a limb with the police until we had put our heads together secretly. She gave me her pledge of silence.

I asked her if she could arrange with the bank to leave half an hour before noon so that we could talk quietly before the luncheon crowd arrived. She said she would call me back, and did so in a few minutes to say that she was leaving at 11:30 by cab. Having discovered that I really was with Whatley Associates, she sounded much less reluctant the second time around.

Lynn Radford arrived just behind me, wearing a modest yellow cotton dress and an expression of worried expectancy. She was a rather short young woman who could no doubt see her 30th year of earthly joys and sorrows approaching from no great distance. She was carrying too much weight for her size and her small features were exceedingly plain. Her dark hair was so unstylishly busy with swoops and curls, it was almost a distraction.

Despite the harsh photo of her in the newspaper, I recognized her at once. I had taken the nearest booth to the door and Miss Radford, with a hesitant smile, sank to the opposite cushion and peered at me in wary silence.

"Sorry about all this intrigue," I said, "but it seems necessary and I do appreciate your help."

She shrugged but said nothing and I asked if she'd like a drink.

She brightened. "I'd love a stinger," she said quickly. "I've been more relaxed having a tooth pulled." She smiled in a way that gave her uncomplicated face the first accent of personality.

I ordered two of the same and she went on to say, "I just can't help being a bit nervous, Mr. Stansbury. Since the robbery, nearly every stranger looms as a kind of threat to me."

"Naturally."

"But you do seem a nice person, not at all scary."

"Little old ladies adore me."

"Go on," she said with a giggle. A waiter brought the stingers and she gulped half her glass in one swallow. I explained that I had once been an artist and that because I studied facial characteristics with a professional eye, I had recognized the basic similarity be-

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tween my suspect and the composite, while most people would fail to note the resemblance.

"What sort of man is he?" she wanted to know.

"He's pleasant, well-educated, has a responsible job. Far as I know, he's never been in any trouble. But don't let that fool you."

"What about his appearance?"

"I was coming to that. He's tall and slender, he's thirty-nine and—"

"That fits him exactly," she said.

"And he wears thick-lensed glasses with a heavy black frame."

"Then you've got the wrong man," she declared firmly.

"Suppose he wore contact lenses for the robbery? It would be a kind of reverse disguise." I signaled the waiter to bring us another round.

Miss Radford leaned toward me conspiratorially. "You mean," she said, "that since he's normally associated with strong eyeglasses, he went to the trouble of buying contacts just for the holdup?"

"Yes, because if he's the right man, he can't see without magnification. It was a small detail perhaps, since he never expected to show the rest of his face. But small details have solved a lot of crimes."

"How clever," she said, nodding rapidly. The waiter brought more drinks and she went to work on her second.

"So be prepared for glasses," I warned her, "and try to erase them mentally. And don't forget, your man wore a cap on his head and you didn't see his hair. It's pure white and there's plenty of it."

"White hair!" she gasped, and shook her head. "No, no, the robber had dark hair, I saw his eyebrows, they were dark."

"So he used a charcoal pencil to darken them."

"Thick glasses and white hair," she mused, hoisting her stinger. "You're asking a lot, but I'll try."

"Concentrate on the look of his nose, mouth and jaw, the shape of his face."

"Yes, but how will I observe all that, just sneaking a look at him from a distance?"

"You'll see him close up. He can't miss us here by the door and I'll introduce you as an old friend. His reaction should tell us almost as much as his appearance."

"Face-to-face?" she said anxiously. "Well, I thought—I mean, I never expected that you would ask me to—Listen, I think I'll need another drink."

I ordered lunch with her third stinger. She only nibbled at the lunch. She was flying pretty high and we were on a first-name basis by the time Allen Cutler stepped into the restaurant and stood near the entrance, hunting a table. I had purposely sat facing the door, and I

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now casually waved him over.

He gave Lynn Radford no more than a quick, speculative glance and a polite smile. If he recognized her in that first instance, his composure must have been lined with solid steel. I introduced them casually.

"Lynn is an old friend of Beverly's," I fabricated. "Spied her coming out of a store and invited her to lunch. Why don't you join us? You're not going to find a decent table, and we'll be on our way in a few minutes."

"In that case . . ." he said.

I moved over and gave him room beside me. I beckoned the waiter, and while Allen ordered, I watched Lynn watching him. Mellowed by the drinks, she seemed in control.

"Do you live in town or are you just shopping?" Allen asked her, as if only making conversation.

"I was shopping on my lunch hour until I met Don," she answered. She gazed at Allen steadily. "I'm a teller at Merchants Security."

"Merchants Security," Allen repeated, snowy eyebrows lifting above the ebony enclosure of his glasses. "I know it well, had an account there a while back, nearly a year ago."

"I was about to say that you do look vaguely familiar," Lynn declared boldly, "but now I'm at a loss to know why, since I've only been with Merchants a little over three months. Say, do you always wear glasses?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so," Allen replied blandly, his face and voice undisturbed by the smallest ripple of tension. He plucked his Tom Collins from the table and sipped it lovingly.

"I should wear glasses myself," said Lynn. "My work is demanding on the eyes and the strain is beginning to wear me down. I suppose it's just female vanity, but I'm thinking of contact lenses. Ever try them?"

"Yes," said Allen without a pause. "And they're a damn nuisance. I couldn't adapt to them. One night I came in stoned, peeled them off and dropped a lens. Tiny thing. I never could find it, so I gave up and bought these." He chuckled merrily.

"They look so powerful!" said Lynn, smiling. "May I try them on, just for laughs?"

"Sure," said Allen. Without hesitation, he reached up for them. The swift movement extended his elbow sharply. The elbow collided with his glass, the drink spilled over the table and trickled into Lynn Radford's lap. She stood to wipe up with her napkin.

A desperate gimmick, I figured. But I had been watching him care-

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fully, and it appeared such a natural mistake . . .

"Sorry, Lynn, how clumsy of me," said Allen smoothly.

"No harm," she answered coolly, and peered at her watch. "We'd better run," she said, and I called for the check.

I went with her to the bank in a cab. On the way, we compared notes.

"D'you suppose he did it on purpose?" she said. "The bit with the spilled drink."

"Probably," I answered. "What do you think? Is he the man?"

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"I *think* he's the man, but I don't *know* that he is. The glasses, the hair . . . The hair is incredible. It throws me off completely. And there's something else—the tan."

"What about it?"

"The robber was wearing this dark blue paisley scarf. When he took it off, his face was pale in contrast. No tan."

"Allen claims he was on vacation at the beach, and since the robbery took place on the third day of his vacation, there was plenty of time for a tan."

"It's terribly confusing, you must admit," she said.

"What about his voice?"

"It doesn't help. This guy showed me a huge pistol, a .45, they tell me. And he said two words: 'No tricks!' He drove me into the suburbs, pulled to the curb and barked two more words: 'Get out!' He said nothing else."

"How about the car he was driving? You must have had a look at it."

"Yes and no. I mean, I was awfully frightened and my concentration wasn't exactly the best. The only thing I *really* looked at was the license tag. But it turned out to be a stolen plate."

"And the car itself? The paper said it was a beige Ford sedan."

"I told the police it *appeared* to be beige, but the paint was pretty well covered with dirt and it was just a fuzzy impression. I'm not sure. I do remember that it was a Ford sedan, perhaps three or four years old, but very ordinary inside and out in all respects. There must be dozens like it on the streets, and if I drove right up beside it, I doubt if I'd recognize it."

"Skip the car for now; let's get back to the man. He spoke just four words, but what were his mannerisms, his actions? What did he *do* that might help us? He didn't just sit there, did he?"

"Yes, he did. Once we got going, he just sat there driving, looking straight ahead, watching in the rear-view."

"Once you got going? Did something happen before that?"

She nodded rapidly. "When he put me in the car, he raced around to the driver's side, and while he was getting in, I tried to climb out. He grabbed my arm, and after a little struggle, yanked me back again. That was when he showed me the pistol and said, 'No tricks.' "

"Anything else?"

She frowned. "Can't think of anything. Nothing important, that is. I did lose an earring that day, but it could have been lost anywhere and I didn't mention it. Later I got to wondering if it dropped off in the car or on the street when we were struggling. Should I have told

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the police about it, do you think?"

"Right now it seems a minor point," I said.

"Maybe to them, but not to me," she whined. "That earring was very special because it belonged to a set given to me by a very special person, long ago and far away."

She fumbled in her purse, brought up a lone earring and dangled it in front of my face. "Isn't that *darling*, with the little heart and everything? It's real jade—at least I guess it is," she said hopefully.

To display polite interest, I took the earring from her and held it in my hand. It was a green heart of dubious jade, fastened to a gold chain, the heart bisected diagonally with a gold arrow. Beyond its sentiment, it seemed of no value.

"Very attractive," I said, and gave it back to her.

"I suppose it's silly to keep it now," she mused, "especially since he's probably married and forgotten me years ago." She dropped the earring into her purse with a shrug.

We were nearing the bank and I said, "Well, what's the verdict? Apparently we haven't anything to go on but your memory. Is Allen the man, or shall we write him off?"

"Oh, no, not at all!" she cried. "I'm just being cautious. If you forget the eyeglasses and the hair, this Allen Cutler's face is very close. Oh, very! Put a cap on him, take off the glasses, and I'd likely say 'That's the man!' "

"In that case—"

"But," she added hastily, "it doesn't mean I'm ready to accuse him openly to the police and the whole world. No, it would be foolish to go off half-cocked. Very dangerous. Think how embarrassed I'd be if I were wrong. And think of the harm it would do him. Why, he might even sue me. No, let's wait a bit. Close as you are, maybe you could dig up some piece of concrete evidence, any little thing that would convince me I'm right in going to the police. Because once I tell them he is definitely the man, they'll believe me, and they'll turn him upside down."

"Listen," I said, "I'm in no hurry to crucify a man who might be innocent. So I'll nose around, see what I can find. Meanwhile, if he's guilty, he'll know I suspect him and he'll be apt to give himself away."

"Call me," she said, "the minute you have news. I hope it's soon, because I'm cracking under the strain. I'm going on vacation next week unless you find some real reason for me to postpone it."

I told her we were bound to get some kind of break in the next day or so, but as it turned out, I was wrong. Allen did not betray the slightest sign of guilt. He was

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friendly, but no more so than usual. He kept the same hours and performed in his job with the same deliberation, his manner unruffled. He did not avoid mention of the meeting with Lynn Radford, but spoke of it only in passing, as one might expect.

I tried his desk for a clue while he was out to lunch. It was locked. I made plans to open it somehow on Monday, the day I often stayed overtime to catch up.

I phoned Lynn Radford Friday morning and told her to go ahead with her vacation, that Allen Cutler was either the slickest operator on record or a paragon of innocence.

On Monday I informed Blaine Whatley that I was staying over to do some paper work. Naturally, I said nothing to Allen. People began to drift out of the office at five and by six there was the silence of desertion. I checked to be sure I was alone, then went to Allen's office, a gadget with which I hoped to unlock his desk in my pocket.

Allen's door was closed. I opened it and went in. I had seen him leave, but there he was, sitting behind his desk, munching a sandwich and going through a stack of papers. It must have been obvious from my look of gaping surprise that I expected him to be absent and was preparing to snoop in his office.

"Well, well," he said heartily, "I guess you heard the news and you've come to say farewell to your old buddy. What marvelous clairvoyance that you should know I would come back to clean out my desk."

"What news?" I said dumbly.

"Sit down, sit down," he said.

I sat, though something in his expression told me I should run. "What news?" I repeated.

"I'm leaving," he answered cheerfully. "Didn't Whatley give you the scoop? Well, I suppose not, since I quit this afternoon at closing and Whatley is too choked up to speak."

"You resigned?"

"Yup. I'll be gone for good in an hour. I offered to hang on a couple of weeks while Blaine found a new boy, but he was furious, didn't think he could bear the sight of me for another day."

"Sorry, but I just don't get it."

He took a bite of his sandwich. "For years," he said, "I've been living in a one-room apartment, squeezing a buck and saving my coin for the knock of opportunity. Today over lunch, I closed a deal with Len Kaplan. I'm buying him out."

"Kaplan? Peerless Employment Agency?"

"Right. It's not the biggest in town, but it'll be the best and

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maybe the biggest too, when I reorganize and build it to its full potential. I'm taking a couple of Whatley's people along with me—Sandra Thompson and Joe Briggs, as a matter of fact—and that's why Blaine is sore at me. I had to offer them more dough than that tightwad pays them, of course. But I want people I can trust, people who are loyal. How about you, Don? Certainly I could trust *you*. Certainly I could count on your absolute loyalty. Would you care to join up as my right arm?"

"Well, I don't know, Allen," I said with the straightest face I could muster. "I'm pretty well entrenched here. There's at least a feeling of security and I'm not much of a gambler on new ventures."

"My, my," he crooned, "I do believe you're trying to tell me you're in Whatley's camp, Don. Perhaps he sent you to spy on the enemy, huh? Well, if there's anything I can't bear, it's being betrayed by a friend."

"That's ridiculous!" I answered. "You must be kidding."

Methodically he began to open drawers, piling items on the desk, among these a great yawning .45 automatic which, however casually placed, appeared to be aimed precisely in my direction.

"Strange," he muttered, "the sort of peculiar junk a man accumulates in his desk which has no place in an office." He picked up the weapon and held it carelessly canted toward my chest. "I don't know why, Don," he said, "but of late I've had the feeling that you've become hostile toward me."

"Not at all," I said hastily, forcing my eyes away from the gun, as if ignoring it would render it harmless. "I can't imagine how you got that impression, Allen."

"I always thought that we were rather good friends," he continued, leaning back in his chair and raising the barrel of the .45 slightly. "But now—"

"Nonsense!" I interrupted. "We *are* good friends, Allen. You mustn't assume, you mustn't jump to false conclusions just because—"

"I have no conclusions, only intuitions," he snapped. He leaned forward suddenly and decisively, leveling the gun at my head. "And these intuitions tell me that you're an enemy, a dangerous threat to my future."

He thumbed back the hammer, cocking the gun with a snick of sound that caused a centipede of fear to scramble up my back.

"Put down that gun, Allen, and let's talk calmly!" I said in a voice that was anything but calm. "Now, listen, Allen, I was only curious, playing a little game. I never in-

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tended to turn you in, you know."

"Turn me in?" he mocked. "What does that mean, turn me in? For what? And who were you going to turn me in to? Whatley?" He laughed bitterly, lips sneeringly twisted as his finger took up slack in the trigger.

"It doesn't matter, I wouldn't believe you anyway," he said as I groped for an answer.

He extended his arm, and the malevolent maw of the gun seemed about to swallow me. One eye closed wickedly behind the glasses, the other sighted.

Then he pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell, there was a spurt of flame. It came not from the barrel but from the bullet chamber, which had sprung open with a muted snap. Whereupon, using his other hand, Allen Cutler delivered a cigarette to his mouth and gave it fire from the narrow butane jet of his .45 caliber cigarette lighter.

Again he pulled the trigger and the flame vanished. He placed the fake gun on the desk and leaned back, crossing his arms. His spreading grin became a snicker, a chuckle, a laugh. The laugh rose and fell, sputtered, began again, diminished convulsively, died with a gurgle.

Allen removed his glasses and peered at me through tears of mirth. Perhaps it was only the wash of my relief, but at that moment I could not see his resemblance to the composite bank robber. He was just an adult kid with a perverse sense of humor.

He knuckled the tears from his eyes and readjusted the glasses. He patted the .45 lighter affectionately. "Exact copy. Spied it the other day in one of those novelty shops where they got everything from itching powder to rubber snakes. Great little gag, what?"

"Yeah, great," I said limply. "Very funny."

"Makes you laugh so hard you think you'll die," he said. The smile left his face abruptly. "Look, Don, I wasn't pulling your leg about the job offer. Good people are hard to find and I need you. Everyone has his price. What's yours?"

"Well, right now, Allen, I'm not ready to—"

"How about five thousand out front as a bonus? Say the word and I'll write you a check this minute."

"Five thousand?"

"Five grand, Don."

I saw the strings, smelled the bribe. Money paid for silence. "It's mighty tempting," I said. "But I'm the cautious type. Let's wait until you get rolling, then we'll see."

"Think about it, kiddo," he said. "And when you're ready, let me know."

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He had a big fat smile on his face when I left, but his eyes were malevolent. I knew that when I had failed to accept his five grand offer, he had become a dangerous enemy.

I went back to my office and waited nervously for him to go home. Fortunately, the clean-up crew arrived, and as if on cue, Cutler departed, a briefcase under his arm.

The big scare with the fake gun had not exactly endeared him to me, and now twice determined, I reentered his office. His desk was empty, of course, but his wastebasket was loaded with discarded junk. I carried the basket to my office and sifted the contents minutely. There were stubs of pencils, a dried-up ball-point, bent paper clips, torn business letters, cards and receipts for this and that, plus the leavings of his sandwich in waxed paper.

I uncovered no curious items until I pieced together with clear tape the torn fragments of a receipt for a valve job on his Mercury convertible, this accomplished by Hickman Motors, Inc., Lincoln-Mercury-Ford dealers, sales and service.

Nothing strange about that, no clue offered—until I noticed the *date* of this valve job. The motor overhaul had been done on the very same day of the robbery. Now, on that day, what if anything in the way of a car did Cutler drive while his Mercury was in for repair?

A big outfit like Hickman, I reasoned, would probably furnish a loaner. Nothing splendid, of course. Just a nice little transportation car, maybe from their used-car lot—like a beige Ford sedan.

I expected that Hickman's new-car sales and service departments would be closed, while no doubt the used-car lot would be open until nine. I used the phone and, in answer to my question about loaners, a salesman told me I would have no problem. When I turned my car in for repairs, the service rep would provide me with some sort of transportation.

Satisfied, I asked no further questions. In the morning, when the service department opened at eight, I would be on tap with a story which would surely uncover the beige Ford for my inspection. If so, when Lynn Radford returned and I took her down for a close look at the car, she just might notice one or two items for identification which had escaped her memory in the excitement.

Now the whole caper was clear enough. In all seeming innocence, we arrange to have the old bus overhauled, drive off in a loaner, switch to stolen plates, rob bank, restore genuine tags, return loaner. Simple!

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Just a little proud of myself, I stuck the Hickman repair ticket in my pocket, delivered the wastebasket to Cutler's vacated office, and went down to my car.

Next morning, when Hickman's service department opened, I was there. I went to the service desk and told one of the white-clad reps that I had lost my wallet and it could be in one of the loaners—a beige Ford sedan. He scowled and said there was no beige Ford sedan in use as a loaner. Did I mean the *gray* Ford sedan?

I said I hadn't paid much attention to the color; that was probably it. He said no wallet had been turned in or it would be in the desk drawer in the office where they kept lost articles. And as of a few minutes ago when he deposited a forgotten pen in the drawer, it did not contain a wallet.

I followed him out behind the garage to a parking enclosure where he pointed to a dusty, gray Ford sedan which I judged to be a '66 or '67. I crossed to it, opened the door and leaned inside. He was watching me, so I made a big search, hunting around on the floor in front while noting the color and appearance of the interior. Then I bent to peer under the seat where there was all kinds of paper and scraps, butts and other debris—plus something of shiny green and gold which positively startled me! I almost shouted.

I groped for it, sneaked it into my pocket, backed out, shut the door and returned to him. "No luck," I grumbled. "Maybe it went to the cleaners with one of my suits."

Down the block I parked and took a good look. Sure enough, it was the mate to Lynn's earring, complete with gold chain attached to green jade heart with slanting gold arrow. If that didn't convince her we had the right man, what would?

There was then a long period of anxious waiting to reveal my find, but at last it was the Monday morning of Lynn Radford's return, and I phoned her at the bank. The vacation seemed to have given her a new lease—she didn't sound so fearfully tense. I told her only that I had a fascinating little memento for her to see and identify. I wanted to watch her spontaneous reaction when I lifted that earring from my pocket and waved it before her astonished eyes.

She asked me to drop by her apartment that evening, and gave me the address. Around seven I arrived in front of a modern high-rise and, as instructed, went up to 12D. She came to the door at once, wearing a pale-pink, flower-cluttered dress which did nothing to conceal the abundance of her flesh, jammed into that skimpy envelope of cloth.

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As usual, her terribly plain features were overwhelmed by a hairdo of frantic complexities.

"How nice," she said, and ushered me in with ceremonial bow and sweeping gesture. The livingroom was too large for its furnishings, which were an incongruous mixture of dreary old stuff and splashy-modern pieces.

We sat facing each other, Lynn primly upright, hands folded in her lap. "Well," she began, before I could open my mouth, "I've been meaning to call you. Because in the oddest way you can imagine, I've become convinced that Allen is innocent."

"Is that so?" I contained my surprise with an effort. "How very interesting in view of—"

"Just wait till you hear!" she inserted. "Are you willing to listen to a crazy story?"

"I'll listen, but—"

"Now just hold everything," she said, "until I tell you some new developments I didn't mention before because they concern you and I was—well, *embarrassed.*"

"Mmm," I answered.

"First, Allen called me at the bank just as I was preparing to go on my vacation. He saw right through that dreadful attempt to identify him at lunch, of course, and he was simply wretched. He said it all started as a joke. Someone in the office noticed his resemblance to the composite and began to tease him. It went around harmlessly until *you* picked it up. You were angry and jealous because a while back Mr. Whatley had made Allen general manager, a job you had expected would be yours all along.

"So you schemed to convince me that I should go to the police," she went on, as if scolding a child about to be forgiven magnanimously. "The point, Allen said, was to cast enough doubt, stir up enough ugly publicity in the news to have Whatley toss him out, innocent or not."

"Fantastic!" I sneered. "General manager! The man is a genius at twisting—"

"Wait!" she cried. "Hear the rest, and you'll see. Now, I didn't really believe him until he suggested that perhaps the best way to clear up the whole matter was to have me meet him at the police station for a conference with Sergeant McLean. He's the officer in charge of the case, you understand." She grabbed a breath. "Allen did feel, however, that there was a chance it would leak to the newspapers. And by the time the police declared him innocent, his reputation, his career, would be ruined. But he was willing to risk it, if I thought that was the only solution."

"A masterpiece!" I said. "Prize-winning fiction."

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"Well, I couldn't help admiring his openhanded courage," she gushed on, ignoring me. "I told him I didn't want to see him hurt and degraded if he were innocent, and there had to be another way out. Allen offered to meet me in any public place of my choosing to discuss it, and I asked him to come to this little bar near my apartment where I know the bartender, a guy who is kind of protective of me. Not that I was afraid. I mean, the top executive of a big employment agency like Whatley Associates could hardly be a criminal type."

Oh, no? She was so taken in, I was almost sorry to burst her balloon, full of Cutler's gas. I was about to show her the green jade earring when she rattled on again.

"Allen was already on tap when I arrived at the bar. He was beautifully dressed in this handsome blue suit and looked like anything but some cheap hood. I mean, you gotta admit, even if you have your personal reasons for not liking him, Allen is a gentleman! Anyway, we had a few drinks and he talked in that earnest, direct way of his, asking my advice on the pros and cons of approaching the police or finding another way out.

"Suddenly, he reached up and yanked off his glasses and stared me right in the eye. And he said, 'Now there! Am I a hood, a gunman? Am I that cold-blooded robber who took you hostage? If you think so, go to the phone, call the police. I'll be waiting right here when they come.'

"The two of us sitting there, eyeing each other so grimly. It was just plain funny. We both caught the humor of it, Allen began to smile, I smiled back, and soon we were laughing ourselves sick. And before the night was over, I knew that I had never seen him before, that Allen Cutler was no-more a bank robber than my own father."

She sank back with a sigh. Then in desperation, I groped for the earring. I was going to dangle it in her face, give her the entire scoop about the car.

"Remarkable tale," I said. "One of the wildest I've ever heard. But now . . ."

She didn't hear me. "It certainly wasn't love at first sight," she was saying, "but that's what it became. I spent nearly my whole vacation with Allen. Does that sound naughty? Well, just take a look at this, if you please!"

Her chubby little hand shot toward me, displaying an engagement ring which sparkled with considerable candlepower—and a silver wedding band. "We pooled our furniture and moved in here," she announced. "The old junk is mine, of course. I just couldn't part with it."

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Everyone has his price, Allen had declared, and he had paid the big one. How long would it be, I wondered, before he felt it safe to divorce her? Probably not until the day after the statute of limitations ran out for the robbery. A long time, Allen old buddy.

"Where's the happy groom?" I asked her.

"He's down at Peerless. They're renovating, nights and weekends. I didn't dare tell him you were coming, but I do hope you'll be friends again."

Even then, just for a moment, I did ask myself if I would be doing her a favor or an injury by showing her the little green earring with the corny heart and arrow.

"Just consider it a bad joke that got out of hand," she was advising me. "Forgive and forget. Listen, it doesn't matter anymore. Allen could be guilty as sin and I'd forgive him, I'd stand by him. I'd even lie for him. I mean, in this lonely world, isn't marriage the most!"

Against both of them, there was no chance. I recognized that, and I thought of the risk I had undertaken to bring in a robber, and then I remembered the offers that robber had made.

Lynn's dreamy, love-sick eyes slid toward me. "By the way," she said absently, "didn't you have something you wanted to show me?"

"It was nothing, Lynn. Look, it was probably just as he said. We almost made a terrible mistake. Tell you what, Lynn, I'll call him tomorrow. I'll call Allen first thing tomorrow. I really think I've outgrown Whatley Associates . . ."

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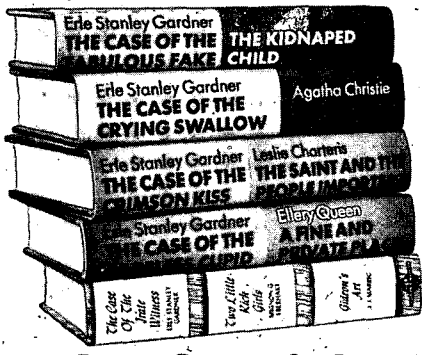

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